



## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### Prologue.

"IS this right for Holycleugh?"  
 "Yes, miss; through carriage."

The door of the first-class compartment swung open, letting in a current of raw, sleet-whipped air upon Stainley Rivers just as he was beginning to get warm.

"By George! this must be one of 'em," he murmured with a sigh, and wished he had selected a smoking-compartment, as the porter proceeded to introduce a procession of dressing-bags, bonnet-boxes, and wraps.

Following these came a young lady, who wore a tweed cape, the storm-collar of which was turned up over her well-cut suit.

Her gratuity must have been worth having, for the porter's "Thank yer, lydy," evidently came from a full heart—or hand.

Her foot-warmer was only arranged to her liking at the very moment the train steamed out of Euston. When at last she turned to look at her companion, he saw a very pretty face.

"Must be one of them," he told himself. "What other creature on this earth would be starting for Holycleugh in weather like this? Now which of them is it, I wonder?"

He turned an interested face towards her; she was eyeing him just as intently.

"You *are* one of them, are you not?" he asked. "One of the Relations, I mean?"

"One of Mr. Titherleigh Hobson's relations? Yes, I am," she smiled.

He laid down his paper.

"So am I; and you, like me, are on your way to this extraordinary gathering of the clans?"

She laughed and nodded.

"I am. It's going to be the most amusing experience of my life," she said, in tones of keen enjoyment.

"Amusing?" he echoed, in tones of sudden hopefulness, as though contemplating a pleasant possibility for the first time. "Has it struck you that it may be amusing? I am prepared to be bored out of existence."

"Why!" she cried, "you must be without the smallest grain of humour in your composition if you can face the situation without a smile! I think it's just too delightful for anything! I feel sure that Cousin Noah is a humorist; such a scheme could only have entered the mind of a genius for practical jokes."

"I don't think I like practical jokes," said Stainley.

"I am going to like this one—beginning with first-class railway fare and a cheque, and ending with portions of a fortune," she cried, her pretty face sparkling with animation. "Oh, the fun of the thing! To think that all the others will join this train somewhere on the journey, and that we shall alight simultaneously on the platform at Holycleugh, never having set eyes on each other before! I am only afraid that I shall laugh out loud when I behold them! But I beg to say that I am distinctly disappointed in you—you are not in the least ridiculous; still, I have great hopes of the Minor Poet and the Hosier's Wife."

"I am the Minor Poet," said Stainley meekly.

"Oh—oh!" she cried in delightful confusion, with blushes and apologies. "I didn't mean— How imprudent it is at all times to talk to strangers! You see, you don't look in the least— *Are* you Stainley Rivers?"

"I am, and sincerely sorry to fall short of your expectations in the way of being ridiculous; but surely there are possibilities in the Elderly Cousin or the High-school Teacher?"

"I am the High-school Teacher," she owned at once, with a burst of laughter which turned Stainley scarlet.

"Are you really Agatha Mayne?" he asked. "Then I must be permitted to return your compliment. You don't look it.—But do you think," he presently said, after some while of friendly talk—for their mutual error had broken down barriers—"do you really think the old boy is genuine? Is not the whole thing a gigantic hoax? Is he indeed as rich as he pretends?"

"I fancy his wealth is beyond question," she replied. "Mr. Hamley, one of the family with whom I board, is manager at Elphinstone's, where he banks, and says he is enormously wealthy. And surely he would not go to the length of hunting us all up merely in order to play us a trick? I think better of him."

She drew a letter from her pocket and unfolded it.

VOL. XI.

"NEWANGA, BRITISH NORTH AMERICA.

"MY DEAR YOUNG RELATIVE,—

"It is possible that you may have heard my name. Your grandfather's wife's sister married a Mr. Hobson, who was, through his mother, an impoverished member of the old family of Titherleigh, of Titherleigh Manor, Holycleugh, Cumberland. They had one son, myself. I am an old man, and childless, and, having made a very large fortune, I have been able to carry out my lifelong dream by purchasing Titherleigh Manor, where I intend to pass the rest of my days. My long residence abroad having completely isolated me from my family, I have for the last two years caused careful inquiries to be made, and I find that I have living at the present moment ten blood-relations. You are the only one on my mother's side, and only one of the ten bears the name of Hobson—an elderly cousin of my own sex, like me, a bachelor and childless. Besides him, there are Stainley Rivers, the minor poet; Dr. Hardy, of Leeds, the consulting physician; Ralph Baring, the country solicitor, who married his distant cousin, Evelyn Titherleigh; and Sir George Halkett, the Member of Parliament; Mrs. Hogben, the hosier's wife; Mrs. Locke, the young matron; Miss March, the private secretary; and yourself.

"It is my intention to benefit you all; but that I may know your several tastes, wants, and dispositions, I invite you all to pass a week with me at Titherleigh Manor. I shall hope to arrive in England in time to receive you; and, meanwhile, my elderly cousin will make all arrangements for your comfort. By application at the booking-office at Euston, you will receive a first-class ticket to Holycleugh, where carriages will meet the train. I enclose a cheque for fifty pounds, to cover any incidental expense to which you may be put, and remain

"Your faithful cousin,

"NOAH TITHERLEIGH HOBSON.

"Kindly address reply to my elderly cousin, at Titherleigh."

"I like that letter," said the High-school Teacher, after reading it through. "Cousin

Noah is not an impostor; but he is either extremely simple or he has a twinkle in his eye. One feels how much he enjoys the juxtaposition of the Member of Parliament and the Hosier's Wife!"

"What I feel," said the Poet musingly, "is that I shall enjoy the juxtaposition of the Minor Poet and the High-school Teacher."

After this they got on excellently, sharing their dinner and telling each other stories, and were quite astonished when, on consulting Bradshaw, they found that the next station was Holycleugh.

"They are all here," murmured Stainley in an undertone to Agatha, as they stood upon the bleak platform in the murky December dusk, with the sleet drifting past their faces uncertainly.

Then a small bent man hurriedly approached the group; his eyes peeped brightly, like a squirrel's, over the collar of his vast coat.

"The Poet—the High-school Teacher!" he piped in a little cracked voice. "Welcome, in Cousin Noah's name—welcome to you both! Let me introduce—— But no! the temperature forbids; let introductions wait until we reach the house. This way—this way!"

With those curious glances of mutual hostility which are peculiar to Britons who have not been introduced, they thronged through the little wicket, where the flapping light of one oil lamp barely revealed them to each other; but Agatha watched, and mentally named each as they passed through. There was a pretty pale woman, still young, whose face bore the look of one who has suffered, and who was undoubtedly the Young Matron. There was a tall spare man, with iron-grey side-whiskers and an alert expression, who must be the Consulting Physician. Following him, a lady who presented a general impression of vast size, bright colour, scent, jewellery, and furs,—without doubt the Hosier's Wife, bent upon doing Cousin Noah no discredit. A large, heavy young man, with an air of studied squalor, in celluloid collar, sordid habiliments, and finger-nails so black as to be discernible even in that light as he gripped

his umbrella-handle, puzzled her not a little, until she reflected that Sir George Halkett was a Radical and a Socialist, and would naturally take these means of expressing himself. Then followed a square-jawed, clean-shaven, middle-aged man, carefully holding his umbrella over a girl who looked too young to be his wife; and, last, there slipped through, a thin, spare woman, closely veiled and cold-looking, who could only be the Private Secretary.

The guests were all invited to place themselves in a roomy, covered waggonette-and-pair, and the spirited horses bounded forward.

"Eleven miles—a long drive," said the Elderly Cousin in a timid voice, "so I have brought wine and sandwiches in case you feel a craving."

"Vegetarian myself," said the Member of Parliament gruffly.

"Ah, indeed, most interesting! Such a powerful physique," quavered the Elderly Cousin. "Hippopotamuses, you know, attain their tremendous size on grass."

The High-school Teacher was seized with a fit of coughing.

"Have a sandwich," hastily said the Poet. "You, I know, like myself, are merely carnal."

"Teetotal also?" wistfully asked the Elderly Cousin of the vegetarian.

"Teetotal also," was the severe reply.

"Ye gods! the folly of the ignorant!" suddenly said the Physician in a curt tone; and after this the talk languished.

They were all very tired and stiff, in spite of furs and foot-warmers, when the carriage stopped at length before a door, which was almost immediately flung open, and at last they stood within the walls of Titherleigh.

"Has your master arrived?" timidly asked the Elderly Cousin of the dignified butler.

"No, sir, he have not."

Everyone stopped short in the narrow oak-lined passage.

"I must crave your indulgence," said the trembling little old man almost tearfully, "that it is I, and I alone, who am here to bid you all welcome. Cousin Noah will be here shortly—in a few hours, at least—to supply my deficiencies; and meanwhile——"

His appeal was abject, his eye was moist

and sought theirs imploringly. The ladies smiled upon him.

"We are most indebted to you," said the Young Matron in her clear, high-bred tones. "Nobody could more efficiently represent our host."

His gratitude was touching.

"I bear the name of Hobson myself," he faltered, "which is why he honours me thus—singling me out— Mrs. Matthews"

manor-house, which for a century past had been neither more nor less than a farm.

But the fairy hand of great wealth had been at work unmistakably. Persian carpets, Oriental hangings, damask, tapestry, Liberty furniture, electric light, every modern luxury had been heaped within the walls with lavish hand. Agatha sank into a chair which literally cuddled her tired limbs, before a noble wood-fire on a hearth



A SMALL BENT MAN HURRIEDLY APPROACHED THE GROUP.

(as a majestic housekeeper sailed down upon the group), "show the ladies their rooms."

Before this tutelary deity the Hosier's Wife trembled visibly; but the manner of Mrs. Matthews was quite perfect. Up the narrow, black oak stair she deferentially guided them into the safe haven of their respective apartments.

The house was most unpretentious—rambling, but not really large—a decayed

that was an artistic triumph, and felt her heart expand and glow.

"I shall fall in love with Cousin Noah," she thought. "I feel it coming on—unless I succumb first to the Elderly Cousin; he is very attractive."

"Well, was I not right?" she asked later, meeting the Poet on the black fur rug which lay before the drawing-room fire. "Is it not exquisitely humorous?"

"Supreme!" he answered. "I am enjoying



every clock-tick as I await the entrance of Halkett, who, I am persuaded, has brought no evening clothes."

Agatha laughed happily, for a long mirror, palm-fringed, reflected her glittering black gown and the La France roses which an attentive maid had brought her, and it all agreed with her crumpled golden hair, and made her feel self-respecting and able for everything.

"My pearls," said she, "belonged to Cousin Noah's mother, who bequeathed them to my grandmother. Is it not a delicate thought of mine to wear them—especially as they are the only jewels I have? I also am waiting, with bated breath, for the entrance of Mrs. Hogben. I know she will wear a coloured silk blouse; I feel it."

As she spoke, the door opened widely, and the Elderly Cousin frisked in, his shirt having frills, and his dress-suit having been evidently laid by in lavender for thirty years; and he held the door open with much respect as Mrs. Hogben entered, in a ruby satin skirt and a primrose silk blouse. Mrs. Locke followed, charmingly dressed, a little rare old lace being the chief thing one noticed about her; then Dr. Hardy, who was pleasant-looking and cultivated. The Barings came in together. She was extremely pretty, and his manner suggested that he was still much in love with her. Miss March, who entered next, had a pleasant, sensible face, though her shyness was too great for her to open her lips on the first evening. Last appeared Sir George Halkett, who had apparently not found time to wash his hands nor brush his hair, and who wore the clothes in which he had travelled.

Cousin Hobson now formally presented the Relations to each other, with very careful and precise accounts of the exact degree of kinship existing between them; and on this theme he was enlarging when the butler announced that dinner was served, when he offered his arm to Mrs. Hogben, to that lady's great indignation. Her knowledge of the usages of Society was too small to have taught her that the host, or his representative, must take the most important lady; she thought the Baronet, or at least the Physician,

should have been assigned to her. But Dr. Hardy took in Mrs. Locke, and the unlucky Agatha found that upon her was thrust the greatness of the Baronet's escort.

The mere sight of the dinner-table took Mrs. Hogben's breath away. It was not so much the beauty of the silver and decorations, but the curious fact of a dinner-table with no dinner upon it, which confused the good lady. She ate her portion of clear soup in such trepidation that the others soon found themselves in a kind of tacit conspiracy to comfort her and make her feel at home; Sir George, though he had no such intention, contributing his unconscious share to her recovery by sitting with his elbows on the table, asking for cocoa, and begging that in future *menus* his tastes should be more considered, which poor little Cousin Hobson promised with tears in his eyes.

"As regards that," went on the Radical Member, eating an orange; the others had just got to the second *entrée*, "I suppose Titherleigh Hobson will be here to-morrow, to issue his own orders? What a snob that man must be!"

"A snob! You surprise me," said Stainley Rivers. "Why do you suppose him to be a snob?"

"Titherleigh Hobson indeed! Montmorenci Jones!" said Halkett with a sneer.

"Titherleigh is my respected relative's baptismal appellation," said the Elderly Cousin, swelling with indignation.

"My good sir, you'd be sure to defend him," said Sir George. "Trust a sycophant to flatter a snob! Why, sir, the world is made up of Titherleigh Hobsons and their elderly cousins."

"One is sometimes tempted to wish that it were," said Mrs. Locke. "Do not oblige us to remember that it also contains—Members of Parliament."

"Humph!" said the young man, after a prolonged stare at her. "I suppose we all feel free to say what we choose to-night in the old boy's absence? You'd be on your best behaviour, wouldn't you, Mrs. Locke, if he was here?"

"I have not two kinds of behaviour, Sir George," she softly and sweetly answered. "But what you say leads me to hope that

you, perhaps, have. If that is so, we shall all look forward more than ever to Cousin Noah's arrival."

He looked defiant.

"I always say what I think."

"Give up thinking; it doesn't do for vegetarians," advised Dr. Hardy abruptly.

"Upon my word, it almost seems as if everybody were trying to be rude to me," complained the Member, with an injured air.

"You see, rudeness is so infectious," suggested Stanley.

"Do you mean that I was rude first?" with an incredulous aspect.

"You called our host, who is also our kinsman, a snob, and his cousin a sycophant."

"Pooh! that's not rudeness; only plain speaking."

"And if the owner of Titherleigh were here, you would have said it just the same, of course!" said the Elderly Cousin, bristling.

"Of course," replied Sir George, reaching for a banana to mash in his curried egg.

"Very well, Halkett, we'll call upon you to repeat it to-morrow," said the Physician drily.

"Meanwhile, give the cook a hint to put more guava into her curries, will you?" said Sir George to his host, speaking with his mouth full.

"You shall give him the hint yourself,—you speak French, of course?"

"Talking about French," interposed Mrs. Locke at the right moment, "my girls,"—and she led Agatha into a discussion of educational methods, which enabled the heckled Member of Parliament to devour a large bunch of grapes in silence.

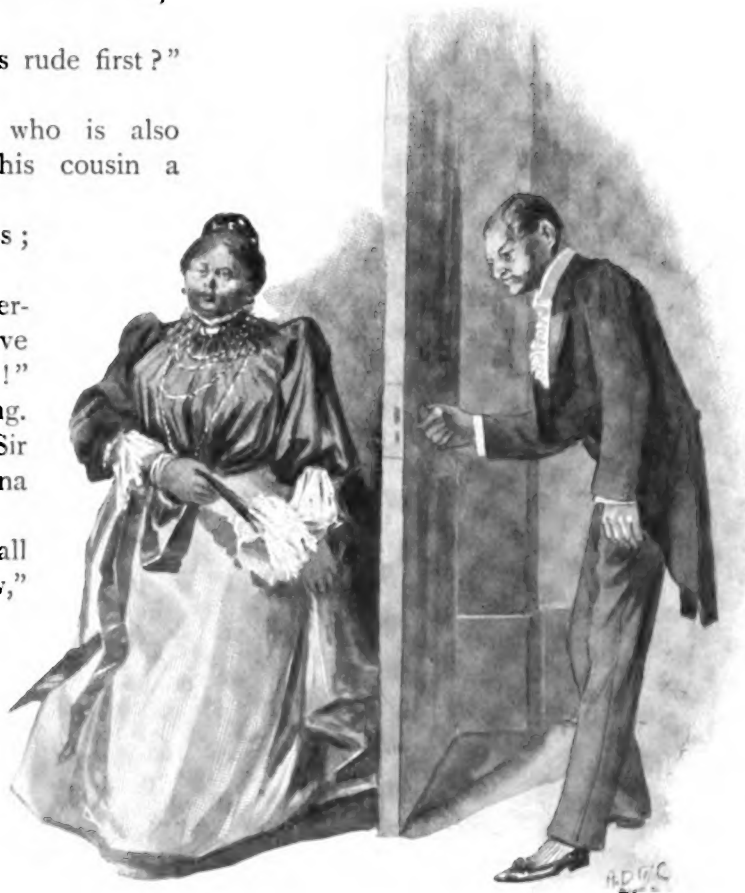
Just as dessert was on the table, a peal at the bell was heard. The Elderly Cousin sprang to his feet.

"It is Cousin Noah!" he quavered, hurrying to the door.

Everyone rose. There was a curious hush as steps rang along the hall, and a

simultaneous gasp of disappointment when only a footman entered. He bore a telegram on a salver, which, in deep silence, was handed to the host, who opened it with shaking hands, closely observed by nine pairs of eyes.

*"New York.—Missed fast boat. Cannot be with you till January 1. Amuse Relations till I come."*



MRS. HOGBEN ENTERED.

He read it aloud; they received it in silence. Then they looked at each other. Cousin Hobson drew out his handkerchief. Slowly he let himself down into an arm-chair; he seemed quite overcome.

"Amuse Relations," he was at last understood to murmur. "Beyond me—hopelessly. My dear people, you must amuse yourselves."

The message had fluttered to the carpet. Stanley picked it up and passed it round.

"Precious hard to amuse yourself in this

hole, I should think!" remarked Halkett, thrusting his hands into his pockets.

"You may perhaps not yet be fully acquainted with all the resources of the place," suggested Mr. Baring. "Do you play billiards? There's a fine table."

"May be. Is there anybody to play against?"

"The answer to that question will come after the first game," said Stainley.

"My dear," said Mrs. Locke to Agatha Mayne and Evelyn Baring, who gravitated naturally to her, when the ladies had sought the drawing-room, "for my part I don't very much care whether Cousin Noah comes or not. The quarters are charming, and I feel I am going to like you both—you seem to be congenial spirits. But something must be devised—some way of passing our evenings that would keep that odious Sir George quiet. Could we play at proverbs, or anything of that kind?"

"We are not exactly the kind of party for proverbs, are we?" said Agatha, with a hesitating glance at Mrs. Hogben.

Coffee had just been brought, in fig-wood cups without handles, and with curiously wrought little Dutch spoons. The poor lady was in sore distress. Coffee at this hour was so outside the range of her experiences, and the guise wherein it appeared so unwonted, that she really did not know what was expected of her, and gasped helplessly at the powdered exquisite before her, and at him who followed with a covered silver jug.

Mrs. Locke slipped up to her.

"Are you wondering whether you dare?" she asked playfully. "Coffee at ten *is* a risk if you have nerves, but I never have strength of mind to refuse it. Let me give you some."

"Bless you, dear, I've no nerves, and, if I 'ad, this thimbleful wouldn't shake 'em," laughed the relieved relation, as the coffee procession swept away from her.

"I don't want to stay awake in this house, though," said Mrs. Locke thoughtfully, as she seated herself. "It is such a haunted kind of place."

"Lor', my dear, you don't believe in ghosts?" cried Mrs. Hogben, as one who should say, "Don't destroy my belief in your intelligence."

"Oh, but I do, Mrs. Hogben; I see them, you know."

Agatha drew nearer.

"Are you a seer?" she earnestly asked.

"I suppose so," assented the Young Matron.

"You must tell us," cried Agatha impulsively.

"One of these days, perhaps——"

Miss March came nearer, her interest overpowering her shyness.

"Tell us your Christian name, my dear," said Mrs. Locke. "I like your face."

"My name is Mary," replied the Private Secretary. "Do please tell us a story."

"I have it," cried Agatha, putting down her cup and sinking with a movement of triumph into a chair. "We will pass the evenings, until Cousin Noah's arrival, in the time-honoured way. Each shall relate something——"

"It is fitting that relations should relate," murmured the Young Matron.

"We are complete strangers to each other," went on Agatha with vivacity; "we come from different parts of the country; we are very unlike each other; we must each have something of interest to relate. We will draw lots for the order of rotation, and every evening, when the gentlemen join us, we will have a story. . . . It is an inspiration! Mrs. Locke, say it is an inspiration!"

"The fact is too obvious to need my endorsement, dear," said Mrs. Locke earnestly.

"This comes of being a High-school Teacher—one used to command," remarked Stainley Rivers to Agatha next evening, when they were all assembled.

Everyone had accepted the situation. The first lot had been drawn by the Consulting Physician, and he now rose and stood upon the hearthrug, facing a ring of attentive faces. And without preamble he proceeded at once to give them—

## I.—The Man with no Face.

"I am no raconteur. This is not a story ; it is a case. I choose it from among many very strange experiences, because it is, to me, inexplicable ; and some of you, in the plenitude of youth and knowledge, may feel able to explain it to me.

"Ten years ago, the North of England was horrified by a crime the circumstances of which may be in the memories of some of you. One of the *dramatis personæ* was a patient of mine ; and of his share in the matter I will tell you what I know.

"A young man named Shirley, who had, I believe, made money in Australia, married a Scotch girl, a Miss Violet Rothesay ; and they arrived, in course of their honeymoon travels, at Riley, the popular inland watering-place where I was then in practice. One day I received a visit from Mrs. Shirley, an interesting-looking girl, whose appearance, though not robust, was indicative of perfect health, her general air that of birth and breeding, her dress and manners attractive—decidedly attractive.

"We had hardly shaken hands before she blurted out abruptly :

"'Are you good at mental cases ?'

"'I am not a specialist, but I am interested in the study of brain disease,' I replied.

"'I come to ask you to do a curious thing,' she said, with some hesitation and a little added colour. 'I want you to come and dine at

the hotel with my husband and me to-night. We have been married ten days. I want you to pretend to be an old friend of my family, to account naturally for my inviting you. My husband knows none of my friends, so there is no likelihood of his being suspicious. I have here written down a few details to guide you, in case of your being able to do as I wish,—such as my name, and those of my family, the place we live in, and so on. Do you think you could come ?'

"I was surprised, of course ; but it was by



"'I come to ask you to do a curious thing, she said.'"

no means the first curious request that had been made to me, and I confess that my interest was stimulated.

"‘I must, of course, ask what would be the real object of my visit,’ I said.

"She waited a little before replying.

"‘I don’t want to say anything that might give you a clue,’ said she at last. ‘I want you to be quite unbiassed,—simply to watch Mr. Shirley and me, and to report to me faithfully afterwards anything that seems to be unusual. After dining with us, you will naturally call upon me next day; and, if you come between eleven and twelve, my husband will be drinking the waters, and you can see me alone. Then we can talk.’

"I said I would come. I felt sure she was sincere; her looks declared her to be in every sense a lady, and her manner betrayed an amount of controlled agitation which called out my sympathy.

"‘Whatever you may notice,’ said she, as she thanked me, ‘pretend to see nothing unusual.’

"I promised. We made the necessary arrangements, and I went to the hotel that night. We dined in a private room. The husband was a heavily built man, about thirty-five years old. He was rather handsome, in a rough-hewn way, but without his wife’s air of distinction. He was taking the waters for rheumatism, and had a slight stiffness of the right shoulder. His eyes were clear, steady, very blue, impressing you at first with the idea of great candour; but I very soon began to feel that this appearance was delusive. The first thing I was able to feel sure of about him was his devotion to his wife—the devotion of a man who is past his youth, and loves, as one might say, irretrievably. Whatever else in his life might have lacked the element of devotion—and I thought there might be much—he was at least a devout lover; there is no mistaking the symptoms.

"I felt her watching me as I watched him. I could see her eyes following mine. I could feel, and more strongly as the evening wore on, that she was wishing, or expecting, that I should become aware of something which eluded me. I studied the man ‘for all I was worth,’ as the modern youth has it.

I felt myself weighing each word as he let it fall, so as to focus it upon his soul and get a clue. He was reticent, but not unpleasantly so. His manner impressed me favourably; but his eyes—his eyes were cruel . . . or relentless . . . or was it only dauntless?

"Why were they so guarded? Why was the portcullis so manifestly down? Did danger threaten the citadel?

"So by degrees I shaped out the notion that the man was on the defensive. There was something he wanted to hide, and more especially from the girl he loved.

"I had found out no more than this when I took my leave. I had purposely led him on to speak of his life abroad, and he had responded simply and easily, displaying not the least unwillingness to be questioned, and giving some interesting information. But his entire preoccupation—that of the married lover in the earlier stages—was a little evident as the evening wore on. I left early on account of it, and made my call next morning, a good deal perplexed as to Mrs. Shirley’s reasons for inviting me.

"She was alone, as she had promised to be, and took no pains to hide the eagerness with which her eyes questioned me.

"‘You noticed nothing—nothing?’ she cried in a sort of fear. ‘Once I thought you must have seen it—it was so close to you!’

"‘It?’

"Quick as thought I glanced over my shoulder.

"She laughed.

"‘Oh, it’s not there now; it goes with him.’

"I looked searchingly at her; she motioned to me to sit down.

"‘We must talk it out,’ she said, in a sort of desperation. ‘Is there something the matter with my brain?’

"‘There does not seem to be; but illusions, you know, are neither uncommon nor dangerous. Is yours of a very unpleasant character?’

"She looked at me with a terrible look in her lovely eyes.

"‘You shall judge. It is a man without a face.’

"‘My dear lady!’



"I always see it following Randall about—ever since the day after our wedding-day, that is. I never saw it before."

"She paused. I waited. She continued in a minute.

"It was there yesterday evening standing behind his chair. It is very horrible, for where its face ought to be is only a mass of scars. It wears a kind of white mask."

"She broke off.

"Have you had illusions before?' I asked, feeling, I own, a trifle sick.

the morning after my marriage,' she said, 'Randall got up early and went out to bathe. We were at Scarborough. I dressed, and went down to the coffee-room; and as I sat at a little table near the window, he came in through the window, which opened on a verandah. This creature followed him into the room. It gave me a shock, it was so hideous. I began to say, "Oh, they ought not to let such creatures into the hotel," but the sight of Randall and his happy face and some roses which he had



"AS I APPROACHED IT SLIPPED ITS HANDS ROUND HIS NECK."

"Oh, never—never!"

"Have you mentioned it to him?"

"She shook her head.

"Why not?"

"Because"—she rose and went to ascertain that the door was closed; then, coming back—"because I think he knows."

"You think he knows?"

"I will tell you why I think so." For a moment she deliberated, turning her wedding-ring round and round her finger; and her colour rose—she was a charming girl. "On

brought me made me forget. Then, as we sat down I saw it was close—close behind his chair. There was something in its hand, I could not see what—I have never been able to see yet; and at that very moment the waiter brought a hot dish to Randall, and walked clean through the creature, taking no notice whatever. Then I knew suddenly that the thing was not substantial—I had merely taken it to be some afflicted creature stopping at the hotel; but now—what could it be? A dreadful feeling of

faintness and oppression came over me, and I fainted dead away, falling on the floor in the sight of everybody. When I revived, the thing was gone, and I would not speak of it to Randall, because I thought it was mere over-excitement of the nerves. Presently I went to get ready for a walk, and when I came back into our sitting-room, with my hat on, there was the thing standing behind him as he sat reading on a sofa. I went slowly up to him—nearer—nearer, trying to understand what it could be. His eyes were on his book, and he did not see where my gaze was fixed; and, as I approached, it slipped its hands round his neck, over his mouth and nose, and he gave a choking gasp, as if something were strangling him.

“His own hands went up to his collar, he staggered to his feet, and went over to the open window, as if to get air. The thing was gone; but as I noticed Randall's face and the look in his eyes as they searched mine, I suddenly remembered that once during our engagement this had happened before. I remembered how terribly shaken he had been, how anxious to reassure me; I felt certain then, looking back upon it, that he wanted to find out whether I had seen anything. All in a moment knowledge flashed into me. He knew about this awful thing, but did not want me to know. Until we were married I could not see; now that I was his wife, I saw. . . . And I felt that, to save him, I must pretend I saw nothing.

““What a curious little catch in the breath you have!” I said gaily. “Do you remember, you choked in that manner once before, when we were sitting in Glen Birken?”

“It was wonderful to see the blessed relief stealing over his face. His look searched me through, as if he could hardly believe that I was safe from having seen the horror he knew of; and he glanced apprehensively behind him in the sunny room, but it was not there then.

““It's a muscular spasm,” he said apologetically. “Don't take any notice; I was afraid you would be frightened.”

““Oh,” I said, very tranquilly, “my nerves

are good, as you know. I am not going to begin by being nervous whenever you seem to ail anything; that would be to prepare a rod for my own back.” I said it saucily, to make him laugh and kiss me, and we went out for a walk; but all that day I was thinking, “Are we both mad? What will be the end?” And I made up my mind to come to you.

“‘Last night the creature did not appear till you had been with us some time. Randall grows restless when it comes. Can medicine exorcise such a fiend, or had I better go to a priest?’

“I felt her pulse; it was calm and steady. I asked her several professional questions, and her answers confirmed me in the opinion I had already formed.

“‘The illusion, I feel sure,’ said I, ‘exists in your husband's brain, and is merely transferred to yours by the power of a strong sympathy. You *are* strongly in sympathy with him?’

“She assented without speaking; it was a very emphatic assent.

“‘Then,’ said I, ‘it is he who should be my patient; and, short of examining him, I fear I can give you no help.’

“‘If I could induce him to come to you!’ she said. ‘But how can I, without telling him that I know?’

“But that afternoon he came to me of his own accord.

“‘Since you are a doctor, and Violet's friend,’ he prefaced his confidence, ‘I am going to tell you my case, on condition that you do not tell her, unless we both consider it advisable.’

“He then told me that for the past two years he had been more or less haunted by the sinister apparition, which he described in almost exactly the same terms that his wife had used—a strong point in favour of my opinion that the whole thing was simply conveyed from his brain to hers.

“He told me that he had never in his life seen such a creature in the flesh. He had no enemies that he knew of; there was nothing on his mind. He had certainly never mutilated, assisted to mutilate, or allowed to be mutilated the face of any human being.

"I fully believed his assurances; the more I saw of the man, the better I liked him.

"I could but treat the whole matter medically. I made him up a prescription, gave him advice, and bade him consider the whole thing purely as a matter of health, mentioning to him several cases in which overwrought nerves had been responsible for hideous delusions. They were leaving Riley next day, but he promised to write and let me know whether my medicine had done him good. I managed to convey to his wife the message that he had consulted me, and it comforted her considerably.

"From Riley they returned to Scarborough, as the air there seemed to suit Shirley better, and ten days later the whole of the north of England was full of the Scarborough hotel horror.

"Two of the visitors to the hotel were murdered in their beds in the course of the same night. They were perfect strangers to each other; they had never seen each other; they slept in rooms on different floors, numbered respectively two and eleven. One was the just returned manager of a sugar estate in the West Indies—his name was Gabbett; the other was Randall Shirley.

"The murderer was caught entirely through the description of him given to the police by the young widow. He was a half-caste, and his face was eaten away by vitriol. His

motive in murdering the man Gabbett was clear enough. He owed his disfigurement and much other brutal ill-treatment to him. He had followed him to England to be revenged upon him.

"The murder of Randall Shirley was simply a blunder. The figures on the doors of the hotel rooms were in Roman numerals. The intended victim's number was eleven, and the miscreant mistook 'II.' for that number. After murdering the wrong man, he had the diabolical self-possession and resolution to go on and murder the right one.

"The method adopted in both cases was strangulation, but of a peculiar kind. The doctors who examined the bodies thought that some small curious tool had been used to close the nostrils and mouth; and a remarkable feature in the gruesome tale is, that so silently was the work accomplished that the young wife, asleep in the same room, was not awakened.

"There you have it—the only case I ever heard of in which second sight was actually transferred from one brain to another; and, like all instances of this incomprehensible gift, the premonition totally failed to accomplish the one purpose for which one can conceive it to have existed.

"It foreshadowed, it could not prevent, the tragedy."



G. M. Robins

*The second of the series—a thrilling ghost story, entitled THE HOUSE WHICH WAS RENT FREE—will be published in the next Number.—ED.*





## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### II.

THE second turn at storytelling had been drawn by the Young Matron; and when they next found themselves assembled round the fire, she expressed herself as quite willing to follow the excellent lead of the Consulting Physician.

"Dr. Hardy," said she, "has set the fashion; he has led off with a psychological story, and it is an ascertained fact that, if once you begin telling ghost-stories, everyone remembers something curious to add to the list. I am glad the doctor pointed us in this direction, for the only notable adventure or experience that I have ever had was a ghostly one; and after such an influential example, I shall not hesitate to relate it, though I cannot, of course, expect you to accord me the same confident belief which you gladly gave to a scientific expert."

"I didn't," said the Radical Member.

"When Mrs. Locke has told her story, we shall be pleased to hear your criticisms," said Dr. Hardy; and Mrs. Locke accordingly with no further preface began—

#### The House which was Rent Free.

"It seemed an offer that I ought to accept, merely for the sake of the children. It would just make all the difference! If I had no rent, rates, or taxes to pay for the first year, it might be possible to make ends meet; for, by next year, those terrible debts would all be paid, and my own small income clear.

"I was determined to pay off everything, at any cost; but the expenses of those operations, that illness, that death, had been greater than seemed possible to me in my ignorance, and had left us woefully crippled in our loneliness, Ruth, Lettice, and I.

"Yet somehow, now that the house in Belgrave Square, and the shooting-box, and the yacht, were all things of the past, I breathed more freely; my widow's weeds were to me the outward signs of a freedom I had scarcely dared to hope for. Charles Preston was in his grave, and with him I could bury all the bitter thoughts of what

he had made me suffer. Thank God, only I had known it. There is no need to speak of it to anyone now ; the anguish and the struggles are over, and the deadly nightmare lest others beside myself should *have* to know. Peace to the dead !

"I was touched that this offer of help should come from Sidney Locke, for in the ten years since my marriage I had never seen him. He had sent me a sumptuous wedding-present, but he had not been present at the wedding. I kept those pearls, when I sold with joy the jewels that Charles had lavished upon me, because they were the only thing I had which came from the only person I knew who remembered me in the old vicarage days. Sidney had been kind then. In fact, I used gleefully to think that he was jealous when Charles whirled me away behind his spanking grey horses, a bride of nineteen, her curly head completely turned by a wooing that took six weeks from first to last.

"And now, after the ten years' silence, came Sidney's voice, speaking to me, as it were, out of the past.

"I am so grieved, as well as surprised, to learn that Preston has left you badly off. May an old friend make a suggestion ? Since you and I were acquainted I have become a landed proprietor, and I have a pretty house in Dorsetshire which I should like to lend you, as I think you may for the present feel inclined to a quiet country life. The house is fairly well furnished, and not too large to be comfortable. If you could make use of it for a year or so, you would do me a great service, for a foolish tale of its being haunted has got about in the neighbourhood, and, ridiculous as it may seem in these days, I cannot let it. If you would go down and refute this nonsense by occupying the house I should hold myself greatly your debtor. I am sure you would be pleased with the neighbourhood, and the air is very fine.'

"He did not, could not know, this man who wrote to me, how much his offer meant, how low was my exchequer, how great the problem as to how Ruth, Lettice, myself, and old Darley, my nurse, were to be suitably housed and fed during the next twelve months. This remote spot was the very

thing ; we should want no new frocks, and food would be cheap and plentiful.

"'Darley,' I said, 'it will be the saving of us.'

"'You're never going to accept a favour from a cast-off lover !' said the old woman indignantly.

"'Darley, what do you mean ? Mr. Locke was never my lover.'

"'Oh, wasn't he ! Much you know about it,' was the old body's anything but respectful reply.

"'Besides,' I went on with dignity, 'the favour is a mutual one ; I shall oblige Mr. Locke by living in his house, which is furnished and without a tenant. Nobody is likely to take such a house at this time of the year. I shall accept this offer on condition that the house still remains "To Let," and that we turn out for any permanent tenant who may appear.'

"I did not tell Darley of the foolish local superstition ; elderly country-women are often superstitious.

"There was no caretaker at Dennismore Hall, so I sent down my ex-coachman and his wife to make ready for our arrival. They had been long in my service, and were people I could depend upon. I felt sure that, whatever happened, Mr. and Mrs. Fletcher would see no ghosts.

"Fletcher secured a curious-looking trap, and met us at the little wayside station. It was good to see his pleasure at beholding us again. The journey was so long that the short winter's day was already fading out of the sky, and it was in pitch darkness that we reached our new abode after a long, chilly drive.

"Mrs. Fletcher welcomed us with a broad smile of satisfaction which was a full assurance that nothing had happened to disturb her tranquillity ; and the well-spread tea-table looked very cosy and 'homey,' with our own silver and linen, in the low-ceiled dining-room

"The house was just to my taste—the rooms were not large, and many of them were of odd shapes. Most of the furniture was of the time of Queen Anne, with additions of queer, foreign-looking things



whose age I could only guess at. The walls were thick, the window-seats deep, the passages dark. It was old enough, but, I thought, too comfortable to be ghostly.

"I never believed in ghosts. It was a subject I avoided, ever since a curious illusion that once came to me during my married life—but that is another story. I had a feeling always after that as if, should I once believe in ghosts, I should begin to see them. I sometimes felt as if I had a curious inner eye which I could keep shut; and I determined not to open it while I was at Dennismore.

"Darley was the only person to whom I told my former curious experience. She called it second-sight, saying it was the fruit of my mother's Highland blood. Since those days I have heard it called the Fourth Dimension.

If it is, there can be no doubt that three dimensions are the most comfortable number for mortals to possess.

"Dennismore Hall was mostly built on two floors, though upstairs, under the gables, were several roomy attics, quite good enough to accommodate servants. These rooms we did not, however, occupy, Mrs. Fletcher and I having agreed that, in such a lonely

part of the world, it was better that our sole male protector should be within easy reach.

"Ruth and I had a charming room, opening into another, occupied by Darley and Lettice; and no sleep could have been sounder than that which we all enjoyed on the night of our arrival.

"Next morning our eyes unclosed on a dazzling prospect. The grand rugged sweep

of a Dorsetshire valley, pine-crowned and desolate, the rush of the stream in its stony bed, the outline of the hills which lay between us and the sea, composed a whole which made one feel how good a thing was life.

"It was piercingly cold, but we had large fires everywhere, Fletcher having discovered among the outhouses a store of logs which would last us the winter through.

"Out of doors we rushed when breakfast was over, and explored the garden, the old stables, the empty pigsties, the deserted fowl-yard; and then, beyond our own boundaries, following the plunging stream down to the dark, still mill-pool in the deep hollow of thecombe.

"The mill was to let also. Its old wheel hung motionless over the weed-grown sluice,



"ON THE BRINK SAT A SHIVERING CHILD . . . WHO  
SOBBED AND SOBBED AS IF HIS HEART WOULD  
BREAK."

There was a great desolation about that place which made me turn round and hurry the chicks home; I felt that I did not want to linger there.

"But Dennismore itself was charming. We went all over and through the house, which indeed was of no great dimensions; and Fletcher and I planned to have some fowls and a pig, to give him employment and cheer up the place a bit. Vic, our big watch-dog, was already there. I had bestowed him upon Fletcher when our household was broken up; and Ruth and Lettice had brought the two Persian pussies, Fatima and Selim, and an excitable terrier, Larkie by name; so that we were quite a household.

"The great zest of existence at first was the effort to procure food on which to sustain it. We were supplied every morning from a little farm close by with milk, eggs, and butter; every other necessary we had to go and fetch for ourselves—and, until we settled down into a comprehension of the position, we had some very funny meals, productive of keen delight to the little girls.

"I felt sure that I should spend a most happy winter, with my children to teach, my new strange freedom to enjoy, and leisure to develop my taste for wood-carving, so as, if possible, to add to my income thereby. When the children were gone to bed, I sat down and wrote a very grateful letter to Sidney Locke.

"It was a week after our being installed that the first curious little thing happened; and, had I had no hint from Sidney, I might not have noticed it.

"I had determined, in view of the untidy nature of the work, to do my wood-carving in one of the attic rooms. There was plenty of daylight there—a quality rather lacking in the low rooms downstairs; and I had brought with me an oil stove which would warm my studio thoroughly.

"On the day that Mrs. Fletcher was scrubbing and preparing this room, I met her just at the foot of the twisting oak stair that led to it.

"Please 'm, I wouldn't let Miss Ruthie run in and out them rooms while the floors is wet, if I was you,' said she.

"Miss Ruthie!' I said, staring at her. 'They are both gone out for their walk with Darley.'

"I think you're mistaken, 'm,' said Mrs. Fletcher respectfully; 'one of 'em came up the stairs just now while I was scrubbing, and went into the next attic, and, when I called that the windows was open, went down again, hurried-like.'

"I paused a minute. I *knew* that the children and Darley were out; there was nobody in the house but Mrs. Fletcher and me, for Fletcher was gardening, and, besides, his step could hardly be mistaken for that of a child. But on no account must I make Mrs. Fletcher uneasy, so I said:

"Oh, perhaps they have not started yet; I will go and speak to Miss Ruthie.'

"And I went downstairs, pondering, to find, as I had been certain that I should, that the children were nowhere on the premises.

"Next day I did not visit my studio, for we were invited to tea at the vicarage, a walk of nearly two miles.

"Mr. and Mrs. Rendle asked with much interest how we liked Dennismore, and in spite of their careful reserve, I could plainly see that they were surprised at our assurances of our happiness there. I was a bit anxious as to whether they would allude to the haunting before the children; but doubtless they imagined that I myself did not know of it, and they were models of discretion. The only thing said about the former tenants was by the vicar, who remarked:

"We were all glad when the Hall changed hands, the late owners were not nice people.'

"I should have liked to make further inquiry, but thought it better not to do so. Instead, I invited them to tea at Dennismore. I saw them exchange glances. Mrs. Rendle accepted, but said something about the evenings being dark—the vicar's throat—and her relief was very obvious when I suggested lunch instead of tea. I had a great feeling of superiority as I walked home to our haunted house that evening! How superstitious some people were!

"I dreamed that night—dreamed of the idle mill wheel, and the desolate pool, and that on the brink sat a shivering child, half-clad,



"AS I LOOKED I SAW THE . . . DOOR SLOWLY OPEN AND A LITTLE BOY PEER ROUND INTO THE ROOM."

who sobbed and sobbed as if his heart would break.

"I started awake. The night-light flickered on the warm curtains and low ceiling, and showed me Ruthie's fat form, curled up in slumber at my side; but the pitiful sobbing continued—it was still audible—it was real. Lettice must be sobbing in her sleep, and I wondered that Darley did not awake to comfort her

"Without noise I slipped out of bed, and, going to the half-open door between our rooms, I peeped through. Both the sleepers were absolutely quiet and comfortable. I crept near enough to Lettice's little bed to hear the child's soft, even breathing and see the rounded cheek and burnished curls. Then I hastened back; and it was as I stood in the freezing night, hesitating, that the idea first occurred to me that the noise I heard might be ghostly. It still went on: there is no sound so torturing to the ears of a mother as that of a child's hopeless misery. My flesh creeps now as I think of that pitiful, broken wailing. It sounded muffled, as though it came from another room,—overhead, I took it to be.

"Snatching a warm dressing-gown, I lit a candle, and cautiously opened the door of my room. The long, narrow passage lay in gloom outside. I listened; all sound had entirely ceased. After a few moments' waiting the silence got upon my nerves, and, drawing back into the bedroom, I closed the door.

"No sobbing was now to be heard. Everything was as still, as comforting, as homelike as it could be. Then, drawing back the blind, I peered out into the night. It was pitch dark. With a glance at sleeping Ruth, I softly opened the casement and held out a candle so as to illumine the garden beds just under my window. The night was so still that the candle burned steadily. There were no large shrubs there, and, had any child been outside, the light must have attracted its attention. But there was no movement, stir, or sound. Either the sobbing was a persistent nightmare going on after having awakened me, or it was something outside the range of one's ordinary experiences. I crept back to bed, feeling very cowardly and small; next morning I patrolled the whole house and grounds without finding

anything that could throw light upon the mystery.

"To no one did I speak of it; I was more than willing to think it a delusion. It seemed natural that I should be nervous and unstrung just now—feeling the reaction after years of strain; a determination awoke to give no encouragement to that state of mind in which one looks searchingly into dark corners, and starts at an unexpected sound.

"Next day was really lovely, and the children danced delightedly off with Fletcher to see how much ice was on the pond—a morning's uninterrupted wood-carving seemed really possible. I did just, as I passed Mrs. Fletcher on the stairs, ask her if she slept well, and she replied that, as usual, neither she nor her husband had stirred all night.

"My studio was charming. It was sunny, and the stove warmed it to perfection. Work no doubt was the thing to cure morbid delusions, and for two hours I was most diligent. I had just begun to feel hungry after two hours' unbroken energy, when I heard a light footstep pattering up the uncarpeted oak stairs.

"Never for a moment did such a thing seem surprising. It was the footfall of a child, doubtless Ruth or Lettice come to say that lunch awaited me. The door was fastened; it was a commonly finished garret door, with a latch which was visible on the inside. As I looked I saw the latch rise, the door slowly open, and a little boy peer round into the room. He looked about ten or eleven years old; his face was white, his dark eyes big and hollow. He was so thin that my heart ached to behold him; and his poor little hand, which grasped the woodwork of the door, was covered with sores, such as disfigure the ill-nourished children of the very poor. There was a purple bruise upon his left cheekbone. Here, doubtless, was the creature who had sobbed in the night—and I, superstitious fool, because of a foolish ghost-story, had believed his pitiful crying a delusion! I sprang up.

"'Oh, poor little man!' I cried, 'what do you want?'

"He drew back behind the door—only

his head and part of his body had been visible. As he disappeared I saw to my bewilderment that the latch was not undone, but firmly fastened. It was the work of a moment to unfasten it and look out; nobody was there.

"I took a swift survey right and left. The stairhead was opposite, about twelve feet to my right. The straight passage had three other doors—all were fastened. I was not afraid of a child in broad daylight, but it seemed that he must be hidden in one of these rooms among old furniture and lumber, and his eyes had looked so scared, so full of the impulse of flight, that it seemed likely he might escape me by darting out of one room while I was searching another. It seemed imperative to secure him, so I whisked down the stair, shut the door at the foot, locked it on the outside, took away the key, and rushed downstairs to the kitchen.

"Darley and Mrs. Fletcher were both there.

"'Mrs. Fletcher,' I gasped breathlessly, 'somehow or other a child has got into this house—a little boy, who seems to be half wild with fright. He is hidden somewhere in the garrets, and he must be starving! You know you heard him moving about the day before yesterday, and I woke in the night and heard him sobbing. He came and peeped at me just now, but when I spoke he ran away.'

"Both the servants faced me blankly.

"'I think you must be mistaken, ma'am,' said Darley.

"'My dear Darley, I tell you I saw him; but he ran away! I have locked the door at the foot of the stairs, so he is trapped up there; will you two come and help me find him?'

"They both came at once. Mrs. Fletcher remained at the stairhead to intercept him, should he run out. But the odd thing was, the rooms, all but the studio, were locked, with the keys outside. We went through them all, nevertheless.

"There was no trace of a child, or of any living thing.

"'It is perfectly dreadful; he must have some hiding-place,' I urged. 'Why does he

not come out? Why is he so frightened? I spoke so gently to him.'

"Darley did not answer; her eyes were fixed on me with a troubled gaze, and I stopped short. I knew in my heart that the door of my studio had never really opened; all this must be mere fancy. The only person who had been told the foolish tale of haunting was the only one to be disturbed. Ah! but what of the footsteps that Mrs. Fletcher had heard upon these same oak stairs?

"I began to feel a distinct lessening of my sense of gratitude to Sidney Locke.

"It was difficult to know what line to adopt with the servants. Gazing at their grave, attentive faces, I realised how inconvenient, how almost impossible it would be to leave this shelter, offered me in my necessity. But if the Fletchers got unsettled, and declined to stay, what should I do? In some mysterious manner, the

impression had been conveyed, by what the vicar's wife did *not* say, that no native of the neighbourhood would take service at Dennismore.

"It seemed that the haunting of the house was confined to the top floor. To leave this unused was simple enough. I wished that I had kept my experience to myself; but it had seemed so idiotic to imagine that the child could be unreal!

"I began to stammer out excuses; it

was nightmare, overwrought nerves, a vivid fancy; I would certainly adopt Darley's advice—take a glass of wine with my dinner, and lie down.

"The rest of the day was not comfortable; shaken nerves will not quiet down in a moment, such a shock leaves the victim shaky and queer. But by next morning a profound sleep had refreshed me, and I could begin to feel ashamed of myself; it



"AT THE DOOR OF THE DRESSING-ROOM THERE STOOD A MAN."

is much easier to believe oneself nervous and fanciful, than that the curtain between the seen and unseen has been lifted for a moment.

"All these laudable convictions were strengthened when a week passed without anything to disturb our tranquillity. The children were well, the air fine, and Darley began to lose her habit of regarding me as though in apprehension of some dislocation of my mental balance.



"But one night—the eighth or ninth after the first sounds, I was again awakened by the sobbing. It was too unbearable ; some assurance that the thing was only fancy seemed imperatively needed. Hastening into Darley's room, I awoke her, and in a whisper bade her get up and come into my room.

"Now we should see if I were mad. 'Do you hear that?' I whispered.

"She grew perceptibly paler ; she did not need to speak ; evidently she heard it too.

"'Darley,' I solemnly said, 'dare you come up to the garrets with me, and see that there is nobody there?'

"'Yes, ma'am, I dare,' she answered simply. 'There *is* a child up there, no doubt, as you said.'

"My laugh was rather mocking.

"'Has he been there nine days without food? He was starving when I saw him! No, Darley, I am going to tell you the truth. This house is haunted. Mr. Locke knew that it was said to be, but he did not believe it. However, it is true, as you hear.'

"The dreadful sounds died away. Darley turned to me with resolution.

"'It is but childish to talk so, ma'am. We know there's no such things as ghostis. But somebody's been ill-treating a child and turned his brain, and we ought to have the law of 'em. Come, ma'am, let us lock the children in here, and you come up with me to the garrets. We *must* find him.'

"Resolution was in her eye as she lighted two candles in glass chimneys, and softly we crept from the room and went along the passage. On the other side of it were doors of rooms which we did not use—two bedrooms, one with an adjoining dressing-room, also the bathroom.

"These lay at right angles to the rooms we occupied, the passage making a sharp bend. As we turned the corner, emerging into that part which led straight to the oak stair, I stopped short.

"At the door of the dressing-room there stood a man. His attitude was of one listening ; in his right hand, which hung at his side, he held a cane. His face I clearly saw, and can only say that it was one of the

worst, the most degraded, the vilest, I have ever encountered. His age might be between fifty and sixty, and in my heart there rose up against him, as I gazed, a loathing which sickened me.

"'Look,' I whispered to Darley, 'quick! What do you see—there by the door?'

"She looked blank ; it was plain in an instant that she saw nothing. And so it was clear that the house *was* haunted, and that I was one possessed of that much-to-be-dreaded gift, the power to see what others cannot.

"'We may go back to our beds, Darley,' I cried defiantly. 'There is no child upstairs, any more than there is really a man there, by the door, where I see him.'

"Even as the words escaped me, the horror had faded and was gone ; and it seems that it was all that Darley could do to drag my collapsed limbs back to bed.

"The next day I wrote to Sidney Locke :

"'Had you some grudge against me in the past, that you should wish to expose me to the horrors of residence in this place? If so, you have accomplished your purpose ; I have suffered.

"'The house is indeed haunted—haunted, as I believe, by a murderer and his victim. Fortunately I am the one who is most disturbed, but I dare not think for how long I could stand the strain ; and there is, besides, to be considered the possibility that, in spite of all my care, the children may get a shock which would impair their nervous system for all the future. I am at my wits' end. Do you think the Society for Psychical Research could do anything? It is awful to contemplate a move just now, but I cannot bear this for long.'

"Two days after the despatch of this letter, Sidney Locke himself drove up to the door of Dennismore !

"We were at tea when he arrived, and, before the little girls, nothing could of course be said respecting the object of his visit. But in every look of his I could read what he would say, his mingled anxiety and incredulity—and some other, warmer feeling, whose very existence I had in old times never suspected, and which it was surely only vanity to imagine now !

"'Ten layers of birthdays on a woman's head !'



"SLOWLY, SLOWLY I DREW NEARER, WITH THE  
FASCINATION OF HORROR; IT WAS THE BODY  
OF A CHILD."

"But it was certainly pleasant to see him, and the very knowledge of his solicitude brought reassurance with it.

"Of course he had come to stay. There was no other place in the neighbourhood in which he could conceivably put up. So Darley prepared a room for him, and when Ruth and Lettice had gone to bed he and I sat over the fire, and I told him exactly what I had seen and heard. He seemed so staggered and upset that I was quite surprised.

"But who told you anything about the Haggards?' he said at last.

"Who are the Haggards?' I instantly rejoined.

"The people who lived in this house before my uncle bought it.'

"I never heard of them,' I replied, 'not even their names.'

"Is that really so? Have you made no inquiries in the neighbourhood?'

"None whatever. The only person who has ever spoken to us of the house at all has been the vicar, who said that the late owners were not nice people, and that he was glad when the place changed hands.'

"Well,' he said, after a considerable pause of surprise, 'the house belonged to a naval captain named Newman. Haggard was his brother-in-law, a man who had never done any good, but for the sake of his sister, who was married to the brute, Newman allowed them to live here, and gave them the care of his only boy, whose mother was dead. Haggard seems to have thought that, as the captain's life was precarious, it would be a good thing to rid himself of the boy, and get the house left to him, and the money too. His wife must have been pretty nearly as bad as he, or else completely terrorised. Their story was that the child was half-witted, stubborn, and disgusting in his habits. But, remote though the place is, whispers of their cruelty got abroad. At last the child disappeared, and they gave out that he had run away to sea, which they declared he had often threatened to do. The father's frantic grief and indignation had exactly the contrary effect to that which Haggard intended. He turned them both out, sold the place, and made a will leaving

his money to the Society for Befriending Waifs and Strays. He is still alive, and so are the Haggards, for aught I know to the contrary.'

"The child was murdered,' I said with conviction; 'and his bones lie hid somewhere about this house or grounds, I feel certain.'

"It seems to me probable that you are right,' he said, after more thought. 'Of course, it was likely that a child ill-treated might run away, but still more likely that the man should get rid of him, if he thought he could do so with impunity.'

"He hadn't the spirit to run away,' I said with a shudder. 'A more down-trodden, desolate creature you never saw.'

"But ghost-stories,' he presently added with a puzzled air, 'are not true.'

"I can't say,' I replied. 'I can only truly tell you what I have seen and heard, and also that Mrs. Fletcher heard steps, and Darley heard sobbing. I am not afraid, though—that is, not now that you are here.'

"He caught me up quickly.

"Not now that I am here,' he began, and stopped. 'I know,' he said, 'that you believe I never meant to expose you to anything of the sort.'

"Of course I know it, and I am ashamed to have written to you as I did; but I was overwrought, and it did seem as though I was never to have any peace. Besides,' I added, somewhat irrelevantly, 'I hadn't seen you then.'

"Ah! And now that you have seen me, you are inclined to believe me honest?'

"Yes.'

"And trustworthy?'

"Yes.'

"Well, I'll try to live up to that opinion,' he replied, jumping up suddenly and walking about the room. 'Then may I stay here, say a week, and continue investigations?'

"I agreed, and, as it was growing late, we separated.

"Next day there was no question of investigating, nor of anything else but skating.

"The mill-pond was five inches thick in glossy black ice, and Ruth and Lettice whirled us off directly after breakfast. They were

like mad things with pleasure when they found that Sidney could cut figures; as for me, I could not, however I strove, shake off from my mind the sinister impression which that place always made upon me.

"I could not be gay there; the house had never impressed me in the same way. But the pool! If ever a place appealed to me directly as being haunted, it was that water. The hush, the curious stillness, the black depths of wintry firs and larches that kept the sun from it all day long,—the sullen aspect of the torpid wheel, hanging as though in horror of what it knew lay under the smooth surface,—it all wrought upon my nerves till I longed to fly the spot. And yet I did not like to leave the care of the children to Sidney, and I could not plead my fantastic fears.

"We went home to dinner, and then I found, to my unspeakable woe, that it was necessary for me to face the awful place again. Lettice was just beginning to grasp the true science of the outside edge, and Sidney really seemed quite as keen as she was herself about it.

"Back we all went, and I glided to and fro, trying hard to think of other things, to forget how I hated the wicked atmosphere that overhung me.

"The short afternoon began to close in; the children must not be out in the dusk. I issued the order to return, and, amid much grumbling, they sat down on the bank for Sidney to take off their skates.

"I came slowly skating down the pond to join them; and some strange impulse drew my eyes to the opposite bank, where the dense shadow of the thick trees loomed blackest.

"There lay something on the surface of the pool, but it looked half submerged, as though it floated. Slowly, slowly I drew nearer, with the fascination of horror; it was the body of a child!

"I saw the small chin flung helplessly back, the grey outline of the pinched face, the sodden limpness of the impotent limbs

"Did they not see it too? . . . I held my breath in utter dread. It may have been thirty seconds, it seemed to me that hours

elapsed, that ages of awful possibilities rolled over my head, before I began to realise that the ice was five inches thick, and that a floating corpse must be an illusion of the filmiest kind.

"Through the roaring in my ears I heard the high-pitched, laughing voices of the children borne on the frozen twilight air; an oppression gripped me—a feeling of deadly nausea; the smoky redness of the west was a blur of blood and fire to my dazzled eyes.

"I did not say anything, so they tell me. I stood as still as if the ice had reached my heart. They became suddenly aware of something odd or unusual in my rigidity. Sidney crossed the pond in a few strokes; his coming was inaudible to me, but he was in time to catch me as I fell in a fainting-fit which lasted for more than two hours.

"In the morning I had developed feverish symptoms, and for several days I was ill with what the doctor called a chill, with a good deal of fever and consequent delirium.

"During that delirium the apparition of the little boy went and came continually. He stood by my bed, he tapped at my door, he crouched on my hearth as if for warmth. To such a phantom I attach, of course, no importance whatever; it was the direct result of temperature, and vanished completely as soon as the clinical thermometer could be induced to register less than a hundred.

"I have never seen it since; and you may consequently be tempted to think, as most people do who hear this story, that the whole of the haunting of Dennismore Hall was merely febrile in its character—the result of my constitution having been in a state of working up for a pretty sharp attack of illness.

"As to the justice of such a view, you who have heard the facts must judge for yourselves; but to what I have already related please add the following before arriving at a conclusion:

"When the thaw came the mill-pond was dragged, and the bones of a child were found in the slime just beneath the scene of my vision."

(To be continued.)



## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### III.

THE person who had drawn the third lot was the Country Solicitor. He seemed very much afraid that he should prove unable to entertain the company.

"I know no ghost-stories," said he, "and I may frankly say that I do not believe in ghosts."

"Come, there's one sane person present besides myself," observed the Radical Member.

"My wife thinks," said the Solicitor, "that one of the experiences which have occurred in the course of my legal profession would be the thing I should most likely do best. If you will all bear with a style which is accustomed to confine itself to hard facts——"

"It will be at least in strong contrast to the style of the last narrator," said the irrepressible Sir George.

The Solicitor passed over the remark as a carriage passes over a stone in the road.

"I say, if you will pardon the dryness of a legal manner, I will relate the case of the disposal of what we will speak of as the Brice property; and I shall call it 'The Heir-at-Law.'"

### The Heir-at-law.

"BASIL THURSTAN stood out upon the grass, surveying with eyes that still held a faint surprise the comfortable mass of old mellow bricks and mortar, and the far-reaching corn-lands which constituted his inheritance.

"Until the preceding day all the blinds at Charton Field had been decently lowered, all the servants had stepped about twilight passages with muffled tread and subdued voice. But yesterday the coffin containing the bones of Alfred Brice wound its way down the gravel drive, along the village street, to its rest in the green churchyard; and this morning the house had flung wide all its casements to the glad June morn, and the new master, standing among the pinks and early roses, was beginning to dare to say within himself:

" 'This is my own.'"

"It had been decidedly unexpected. Alfred Brice was an eccentric, taciturn man, much disliked by his equals. His interests had lain in the purlieus of life, and it had been confidently anticipated by his few relatives



that his money would prove to have been left to various persons whose claims were not of the strictly legal order.

"But he had made no will at all.

"Marson, the man who had been his servant for years, had suggested to him his duty in this respect, when his brief, final illness set in, and had been met with a blunt refusal. He would make no will; his money might go to the devil. He drew out bank-

notes to  
the amount



"THE MAN DECLINED TO TAKE THE MONEY IN SO IRREGULAR A WAY."

of £500 from beneath his pillow, and handed them to Marson.

"'Here's your share of the swag, and hold your tongue,' said he.

"The man declined to take the money in so irregular a way.

"'Take it or leave it,' replied his master, 'it's all you'll get.'

"But he recalled his doctor at his next visit, and asked him to witness the gift.

"'Now they can't say you stole it,' he grinned.

"So he died, and they summoned the next-of-kin, Basil Thurstan, bank-clerk, only child of Brice's cousin Clara, deceased.

"It was not a magnificent estate, but it was a competence. There was an accumulation of income unspent for many years; and Basil, who was country-bred, though up to this time a prisoner of the city, saw that the revenues of the land might be increased if the soil were properly handled. To him it was like a fairy-tale. He had never dreamed of possessing his cousin's property. There had

been no intercourse, and Alfred Brice was apparently a very strong man, not much over fifty.

"But he was dead and buried, and Charton Field belonged to the heir-at-law.

"He looked around with kindling eye, thinking how he should grow to love the place. He had no thought but to live and die there.

"The postman trudging up the drive touched his cap to the new master, and handed him a bundle of letters. Basil strolled

back to the house and his breakfast, sorting the letters in his hand. One of them was addressed to the dead man—to the Alfred Brice who, ten days ago, had himself strolled in this garden before breakfast. This envelope gave a curious thrill to the new master. A letter to the dead! The address was in a pretty, flowing hand, undoubtedly feminine. As administrator of the estate he must of course open it. Carefully he smoothed it out, propped it against the solid, old-fashioned Sheffield

urn, and read it as he munched his grilled chicken.

“ ‘ELLENDEN,  
“ ‘CAIRNS, N.B.

“ ‘DEAR TAFF,—

“ ‘You will see that I have taken a full week to consider your letter, and I know that you will be glad to hear that at last I have taken my courage in my two hands and broken the awful news to papa. He took it quite mildly; there was hardly any storm at all. So you were right, and I might just as well have done it two years ago. Well, don't be too hard on me. It is done now, and there is no reason why everybody should not know it. I shall start to-morrow for Charton Field, and you must warn the servants that I am coming. Of course I must bring papa—I dare not leave him; but if you carry out your suggestion of making the room at the end of the east passage into a sitting-room for him, I don't think he will worry you much. I really wonder that you want to have me, after my leading you such a dance! I must try and make up for it by being the most submissive wife in the world, and doing all I can to atone for two miserable years. They have been just as miserable for me, if that is any comfort to you.

“ ‘Hoping to see you on the afternoon of your receiving this,—you'll admit that, after once making up my mind, I lose no time,—

“ ‘Believe me, dear,

“ ‘Your affectionate wife,

“ ‘CHRISSIE BRICE.

“ ‘P.S.—Train due Charton Road, 4.23.'

“It was a sultry morning, and perhaps it was natural that the first effect of this letter upon Basil should be to cause him to pull out a handkerchief and pass it over his brow. Then, with pulses drumming, he set himself to grasp the facts.

“His cousin had left a widow; his widow was in ignorance of his death; she and her father would arrive there that day.

“The whole world crumbled and fell into dust at his feet. He had been king of his castle less than one day. His mind whirled about, trying to think things out. It must be a fraud. If his cousin had left a wife,

would he not certainly have made a will? There seemed to be more than one reply to this question. Doubtless the man had not thought himself so near death as he in fact was. It seemed likely that he might have been awaiting the arrival of this particular decision. In the letter to which it formed the answer he had probably delivered some kind of ultimatum. It was clear that the relations between the pair had been peculiar. Had the document in Basil's hands reached the person for whom it was intended, the dying man would most likely have vindicated his wife's position before the world by making a will. But it seemed easy to imagine his grimly declining to acknowledge a wife who apparently had for two years disowned him; it would be a punishment to her to leave her to assert and prove her own identity. These thoughts quickly suggested themselves.

“Prove it? Of course she must prove it! Doubtless she could prove it; and then—the stool in the bank again for Basil Thurstan.

“Oh, why could she not have written sooner? Why not have spared him these few days in a fool's paradise?

“He wanted to have someone to talk to; it was imperative that he should have someone to consult. In the absence of other counsellors he rang the bell for Marson.

“‘Marson,' he broke out abruptly, ‘had you any reason to believe that your master was—married?’

“Marson stood still with an arrested expression: ‘No, sir; I knew he wanted to be.’

“‘You knew he wished to be? Who was the lady?’

“‘Miss Chrissie Macnaghten, sir. Her father was a retired sea-captain in poor health. She refused to leave him.’

“Basil dropped into a chair. He felt the net of destiny closing round him.

“‘Where did she live?’ he faintly asked.

“‘Near Cairns, not far from Edinburgh, sir. A lady you couldn't but pity, her father was such a one to swear; never heard such language.’

“The man was swiftly and deftly collecting the scarcely touched breakfast

dishes ; he did not as yet realise the gravity of the position.

" "Did he, my cousin, correspond with Miss Macnaghten ?"

" "Oh, yes, sir, he used to write to her."

" "Did he write somewhere about the time that he was first taken ill ?"

" "Yes, sir. I had just come in from taking it to post when he had his stroke. There were a good many letters from her, sir, but he took and burned them all when he found he was took for death. I thought he might like her telegraphed for, being so fond of her ; but it's my belief he did not know he was so far gone, not by a good deal, as what he was. I did mention it, sir, when he had seen me put all the letters in the fire—asked him kind of round-about, you understand, sir ; but he cut me pretty short."

" "Well, they were married," said Basil faintly. "That seems clear ; and she doesn't know he's dead, and she is coming here to-day."

"Marson's jaw dropped.

" "Married, sir ? Are you sure ?"

" "As you seem to know so much about it, I think you had better read the letter," replied Basil.

"The man took the letter and read it through.

" "Well, sir," he said in a voice of real sympathy, "I'm afraid that just about knocks you out."

" "Looks like it," said Basil, wheeling to the window, and staring out in order to have time to compose his features. Should he take the first train to town, or should he wait and confront the new mistress ?

"He felt that dignity and curiosity alike advised the latter course. Besides, there was just a chance of fraud. Marson seemed to think the game was up ; but he, Basil, meant to make sure of facts first.

"But that letter, so natural in its lack of effusiveness, written to a dead man, under the impression that he lived ! He somehow felt that the conclusion was foregone.

" "Rooms must be got ready, Marson," said he drearily ; "dinner must be ordered, and I must go and meet the train."

"The afternoon was a glorious one ; all

the air was hay-scented, the trees in the untainted livery of June verdure. The tiny village station was baking in the heat, sleeping in the profound afternoon calm as Basil sauntered up and down the platform. Outside waited the waggonette and horses which he had this morning supposed to be his. The revolutions of the wheel of life had been too rapid for him these last ten days.

"He had unearthed a legal volume in the library, from which he had learned that if an intestate left a wife and no other heirs, the Crown helped itself to two-thirds of his land during her life-time, and the rest at her death ; and if he left cousins and no wife, they, the cousins, shared equally. But of what befell the estates of the intestate who left a wife and a first-cousin once removed, the book seemed to have no clear idea, or could convey none to Basil. He had accordingly posted a letter to Mr. Cornford, the lawyer who had written to him a week ago, asking him if he could to come to Charton the following day ; and now there was no more to be done but to await the march of events.

"The train swept in, and came to a standstill. The passengers alighted, four or five of them, letting themselves down on the platform with leisurely rusticity. A young lady in a holland gown and large white hat sprang out with an energy in marked contrast. She looked up and down the station—in vain, apparently ; then flew to the guard, and could be heard making urgent representations. The guard summoned the station-master from his tea, and Basil, divining that this must be his supplanter, went forward. They were grouped round a third-class carriage, on the uncomfortable seat of which a little shrivelled old man lay prostrate.

" "It was the heat," the lady was saying breathlessly, "and the exertion. You must fetch a shutter ; I am so afraid of hæmorrhage for him."

" "You must be Mrs. Brice, I think," said Basil, lifting his hat.

"She turned to look at him, and the colour rushed to her face.

" "Who are you ?" she asked faintly.

"I am Mr. Brice's cousin, Basil Thurstan; I have come to meet you."

"He had now a full view of her face, and its sensitive beauty awakened in him a kind of horror that such a woman should have belonged, even nominally, to Brice."

and Basil at once entered the compartment, and with the help of the guard succeeded in placing the scolding, irritable little man upon it, and lifting him out of the train. Then the guard set down his burden, sprang on board, and the delayed train passed out



"THE DELAYED TRAIN PASSED OUT OF THE STATION, LEAVING THEM STARING AT EACH OTHER ACROSS THE INVALID."

"She stared at him as if trying to collect her thoughts, her eye travelling swiftly over his clean-cut face, with its London pallor. He seemed at a loss."

"At that moment the station-master brought a shutter from the waiting-room,

of the station, leaving them staring at each other across the invalid."

"Why did not Mr. Brice meet us himself?" she asked huskily.

"He thought her manner odd—half-timid, half-defiant."

"‘He could not come,’ he replied gravely. ‘Let us get into the carriage, and I’ll explain.’

"With the help of the entire station staff, this was done. Captain Macnaghten was laid along one side of the waggonette in as much comfort as they could devise, and his daughter sat opposite beside Thurstan. It was curious how all his sympathies, which this morning had been for himself alone, transferred themselves instantly to her. His heart throbbed uncomfortably and his throat felt dry at the thought of the news he had to break.

"She was a beautiful girl—or hardly to be called a girl, perhaps. She looked about eight-and-twenty. There were dark marks under her large grey eyes, and a certain restlessness of manner irresistibly suggested the idea that she was not glad to come. She glanced at him several times before she spoke again. He was silent, because he had no idea how to put what he had to say to her. At last she said abruptly :

"‘I never heard of you.’

"He smiled.

"‘I can well believe it. I never saw my cousin to my knowledge, and never heard from him.’

"‘Then why are you here now?’

"She brought matters to a point thus in a curious, toneless voice that sounded forced. He looked at her, puzzled.

"‘My cousin has been ill,’ he slowly said.

"‘He said nothing of illness to me in his last letter,’ she replied quickly.

"Basil looked hard at her.

"‘It has been very sudden.’

"She raised her eyes fully to his. Slowly colour mounted to her cheeks—to her very brow.

"‘Very ill?’ she gasped, under her breath.

"He nodded.

"Her eye fell on his hatband, on his black tie. She half got upon her feet, then fell back again in her place.

"‘You mean—you mean to tell me——’

"‘No man ever had a worse task ; but I suppose there is nobody but me to tell you.’

"‘He is . . . dead !’

"‘Dead and buried. He died a week ago.’

"‘Papa,’ she said breathlessly,—‘papa !’

"The sick man, who seemed to have sunk again into unconsciousness, did not open his eyes.

"‘Papa !’ leaning forward, and speaking in a piercing whisper, ‘he is dead ! Taff is dead !’

"He did not seem to understand ; he himself looked as though death were not far away.

"Basil could only stare diligently out of window. He could offer no comfort. There was a stillness in the carriage. If she wept, it was in perfect silence. For a while the clop-clop of the horses was the only sound. As they turned in at the gates of Charton Field he heard her voice ; it was quite steady.

"‘You opened my letter ?’

"‘I had to.’

"‘Are you the heir ?’

"‘I supposed so until I read the letter.’

"‘Oh !’

"The carriage stopped. Basil was glad to spring out, and tell Marson to find a sofa and have it brought into the hall.

"Marson greeted the young lady with a subdued respectfulness exactly befitting the situation, and hurried off to summon help.

"‘I am grieved indeed that you should have so poor a welcome,’ said Basil, as the widow entered her husband’s home.

"‘It is my own fault,’ she said firmly, more as though speaking to herself than to him. ‘I did wrong and I am punished—I am punished. But I wish—oh, I wish with all my heart, that my letter had reached him before he died !’ Her voice shook, and she turned away. ‘You will excuse me,’ she murmured ; ‘I must be alone, and try to face it.’ She made for the place where a housemaid stood ; he heard her hurriedly ask for her room, and heard, too, the storm of tears which broke as the sympathising woman led her away. He was relieved to hear her cry. The way she had taken it had struck him unpleasantly. It had seemed to bear out a theory which had been in the back of his mind, that her real reason for delay had been not her love

for her father, but her lack of love for her husband. He guessed that remorse was the cause of her present tears.

"Shrugging his shoulders, he left her unamiable parent to the care of the servants, and strolled round to the stables to send a boy for the doctor.

"To his great relief, Mrs. Brice did not again appear that evening. He was profoundly doubtful of their mutual relations. Was he host or was she hostess? The delicate question could not be answered until Mr. Cornford's arrival. His amateur researches into the law had impressed him with the idea that the childless widow of a man was more or less of a *quantité négligeable*; he certainly should not be, as he had at first imagined, beggared in consequence of Mrs. Brice's appearance. But he felt uncomfortably sure that, if Alfred Brice *had* made a will, he, Basil, would have had not a farthing, not an acre, in the lifetime of the widow. Why should he? He was nothing to the dead man, nor the dead man to him. He told himself that he was thankful when again at breakfast-time his new relative was not visible. Yet he felt that he should like to see her; he wanted to know whether she had slept or whether she had wept all night—a contingency he did not like to face.

"She was in attendance upon her father, whose condition seemed to give rise to real anxiety. The doctor last night had thought very badly of him. After living these two years when his life prevented the union of husband and wife, he seemed now determined to die when his death would leave his daughter certainly alone, and possibly destitute.

"Mr. Cornford arrived a little before twelve. He was not surprised to hear of Mrs. Brice's existence. He said that Brice was the kind of man who does that kind of thing. He knew very little of him; he had never been employed except when a lawyer was absolutely indispensable—never consulted at all. Brice had lived entirely to himself. He had no friends; intimacy was a thing he had shunned. Mr. Cornford could not speak with certainty until he had seen the title-deeds of Charton Field, but he thought it most likely that the widow would

take a half of the personalty and a third of the realty for life. Basil sighed. The dividing of the money would render his living on the land impossible. The house would have to be let.

"‘Have you had much talk with Mrs. Brice?’ asked Mr. Cornford. ‘If anyone knows anything of her late husband's intentions, I suppose she would. He may have confided in her.’

"‘I have hardly seen her. Naturally she was very much shocked, and—and—cut up, I suppose, last night; and this morning she has not left her father, who appears to be dying. I will send to let her know that you are here.’

"In about a quarter of an hour she came down. She was wearing a white summer gown, and had tied a black velvet ribbon round her waist—apparently the nearest approach to mourning that her present resources would allow. Her eyes told of sleeplessness, but she was quite composed. Mr. Cornford said a few kind and polite things, to which she made brief, suitable replies.

"‘Now, Mrs. Brice, you will forgive our troubling you with business thus early; but your husband's intestacy leaves us in an awkward position.’

"‘My husband's——’

"‘Intestacy. I mean, he died without making a will.’

"She looked faintly surprised.

"‘Had he made one, we should, of course, not have fallen into the error of believing that Mr. Thurstan was the only heir. We should not have ignored your existence in the way our ignorance has compelled us to do. You must understand that we are not to blame for the fact that nobody knew that Mr. Brice was married.’

"‘Of course you are not to blame for that; but you are mistaken in thinking that my husband made no will. I have his will with me; would you like to see it?’

"There was a minute's dead silence. The lady's eyes were fixed on Basil's face, but it expressed more relief than consternation; at least there would be no doubt now.

"She rose and went out of the room, while Mr. Cornford looked at the young man.



"‘This is curious,’ he said.

"Basil gave no reply. To himself he hardly seemed to breathe until the rustle of her dress was heard again, and she entered, with a long envelope in her hand. It bore the dead man's scrawling handwriting outside.

"‘In case of loss, to be returned by finder to Miss Macnaghten, Ellendean, Cairns, N.B., when a reward will be given.’

"Mr. Cornford drew the short will from the envelope. Brice himself had drawn it up, but the terms were correct enough. The lawyer's eye fastened upon the end, and he raised his head with a smile.

"‘This is not signed,’ he said.

"‘Oh no,’ she replied quietly, ‘it is not signed; he said he would sign it the moment my foot crossed his threshold.’

"Mr. Cornford looked at Basil.

"‘Not worth the paper it is written on,’ he said.

"‘What are the terms?’ asked Basil abruptly.

"‘Everything to her, unconditionally.’

"‘Does the signature make all that difference?’ asked Mrs. Brice wonderingly. ‘You can see my husband's intention there plainly enough. He meant me to have all.’

"‘All that goes for nothing legally, dear madam,’ said the solicitor. ‘Remember, too, that his intention at the time of his death was not that you should have all this; it was to be yours when you fulfilled a certain condition,—that condition was unfulfilled when the testator died; consequently Mr. Thurstan cannot feel the moral scruples which might have influenced him had the lack of signature been manifestly unintentional.’

"‘But I came,’ she said, trembling, ‘I came to fulfil the condition—my letter shows that—’

"‘Yes, dear madam, but you came too late.’

"There was a long silence. Basil looked down at the floor, learning by heart the pattern of the ugly carpet. It seemed a long time before Mrs. Brice spoke.

"‘Then Mr. Thurstan is the heir?’ she said at last.

"‘Not altogether, if you prove, as of

course you will, your claim to be what you say you are.’

"She gave an indignant start.

"‘What do you mean?’

"He answered her gently and with courtesy.

"‘My dear lady, no doubt exists on the point in my mind, and I think I may add in Mr. Thurstan's; but the fact remains that your husband died without acknowledging you. We have only your own word for the fact that you are his wife; that is not enough for the law. If you are to take a wife's share of the estate, you must prove that you really are the wife of Alfred Brice.’

"‘How can I prove it?’

"‘With the greatest ease,’ he said, taking out his pocket-book, ‘by informing me when and where you were married.’

"‘We were married in Edinburgh,’ said she.

"‘Edinburgh. Good! In what church?’

"‘Not in a church. In a hotel . . . the Lord Gray, in Arbutus Square.’

"‘The date?’

"‘July 15, the year before last.’

"He wrote down these points.

"‘Your father did not know of the wedding?’

"‘No, he was out for a walk. Alfred wished the ceremony performed to make sure of me. He knew that I should not come to him then, but he thought I must come sooner or later if I was his wife. My father did not know that he was in Edinburgh. The witnesses were just people belonging to the hotel. As soon as we were married, Mr. Brice went away. It was the end of our stay there; we left the following day. Before he left he gave me this will, and said he would sign it the moment his wife crossed his threshold.’

"‘Has he since endeavoured to persuade you to live with him?’

"‘Constantly; but I dared not confess to my father. His temper is violent, and the doctors told me any great excitement might be his death.’

"‘Now, will you give the name of the minister who performed the ceremony?’

"‘There was no minister. It was simply

a declaration in the presence of witnesses; they said that was enough in Scotland.'

"Without doubt; but this kind of wedding is harder to prove, when anything turns upon it, than our English functions. Well, I suppose that Mr. Thurstan can have no objection to your remaining here while your claim is investigated?'

"She sprang to her feet; evidently she was deeply hurt.

"Am I Mr. Thurstan's guest in my husband's house?'

"The moment we are satisfied of your legal claim, it is for you to take out letters of administration,' replied Mr. Cornford; 'but at present your husband's failure to acknowledge you places you in an awkward position. I feel sure that Mr. Thurstan will know how to make it as little awkward as possible.'

"Basil rose.

"It seems to me that my best course might be to go to Edinburgh myself,' he said. 'The estate is not big enough for us to wish for unnecessary legal expense. If Mr. Cornford thinks I should do as well as the clerk he would probably send, let me go, and then you will have the house to yourself, Mrs. Brice, and perfect quiet for your invalid.'

"She inclined her head without saying a word; but she looked as if she appreciated his courtesy.

"Mr. Cornford thought the idea a good one; he could feel how hard it would be for Basil to sit and wait.



"THIS IS NOT SIGNED,' HE SAID."

"So it was settled; and Basil did not see the widow again before he set out upon his journey.

"It was with curiously mixed feelings that he approached Charton Field on his return. What was he going to say to the woman who awaited him there? What would the law say? Was there ever such an intricate situation before?

"His brow was quite wrinkled and furrowed with speculation and thought as he came up the gravel sweep. He was on foot, for he had been unable to say exactly at what time he should arrive; but he had barely entered the drive before he saw Mrs. Brice coming

to meet him. She had assumed a black dress since he last saw her, and it made her look taller and more stately than ever. He was conscious as she approached that he admired her very much. The sleeves of her simple gown were transparent, ruffled over a pair of beautiful arms. She wore no hat, and the evening sun turned her brown hair to gold as it shone through.

"‘It has been so hot all day,’ she said; ‘and I have not left the sick-room until now. After a day of terrible pain, he is asleep at last. Let us go into the garden, and you shall tell me what you have done.’

"‘That will not take long,’ said Basil, as he turned aside with her down a shady path leading away from the house. ‘I have done nothing at all.’

"She looked at him keenly. ‘Nothing at all?’

"‘Your mysterious marriage will never be proved, as far as I can see,’ replied Basil. ‘The Lord Gray Hotel no longer exists.’

"‘No longer exists?’

"‘It was pulled down nearly two years ago for purposes of rebuilding. Nobody knows what became of the proprietors; they went to New Zealand.’

"‘What can be done?’

"‘I am sure I don’t know. There seems to be no register of the marriage; but that, I am told, will not affect the validity of it, if it can be proved. I made as many inquiries as I could about the waiters and servants at the hotel, and inserted advertisements in all the papers; but I could ascertain nothing whatever.’

"‘But there was a paper,’ she slowly said; ‘we signed our names. Taff had it. He kept it, so that I could never deny him. Surely that can be found?’

"‘Before I left here for Edinburgh,’ said Basil, ‘I went over every scrap of writing that I could find. I called in Marson, and he showed me every place where his master had ever put anything. He had very few papers; he was always one to destroy things rather than to keep them. There was no mention of you in anyway anywhere. Marson knows for certain that his master was in Edinburgh at the date you gave us,

and that is all. No, the only hope is in yourself now.’

"‘In me?’

"‘They had reached a garden seat, and paused in act to sit down. She turned to him, and their eyes met. Her beautiful eyes, which looked so proud and so trustworthy, flickered before his. For the third time in their very brief acquaintance a scarlet blush stained her clear skin. Holding her gaze with his own, he said:

"‘Show me your husband’s last letter to you—the one to which I saw your answer.’

"She seemed to hold her breath for a long minute; then she slowly said, ‘You—doubt me?’

"‘Did he? If so, that moment was the first time.

"‘How can you say so?’ he said. ‘Have I seemed to despise you as I should despise an adventuress?’

"She was marble pale now.

"‘As you would despise an adventuress,’ she repeated.

"Then she looked up at him critically.

"‘I should not wish to incur your contempt; you are hard and cold, with no sympathy for weakness.’

"‘Am I? Do you think you know me?’

"‘Do you think you know me,’ cried she, ‘that you suspect me of—of—this?’

"‘I don’t know you in the least,’ he answered promptly. ‘I have never known any women well, except my mother. I make no boast of knowing you; but I have assumed that you were not base—you do not look like a deceitful woman.’

"She sat down and hid her face. After a while she asked, without looking up:

"‘If I said I would not let you see the letter, should you assume that it was because there was something in it which would be fatal to my claim?’

"‘Yes,’ said Basil shortly.

"‘Why,’ with a burst of indignation, ‘then you would not think it possible that there might be things too sacred—things between husband and wife—’

"‘No!’ said Basil, ice-cold, ‘I feel sure there was nothing sacred between you two. You never loved Alfred Brice; you played with his love, which seems to have been a

real thing. He punished you for that, and I sympathise with him; I would have punished you had you treated me as you treated him.'

"'Would you?' She looked up at him with tear-dashed eyes. 'Yes, I am sure you would; you are so good, you would be very pitiless.' She got up. 'I must go and fetch the letter, I suppose.'

"'You have it, then?'

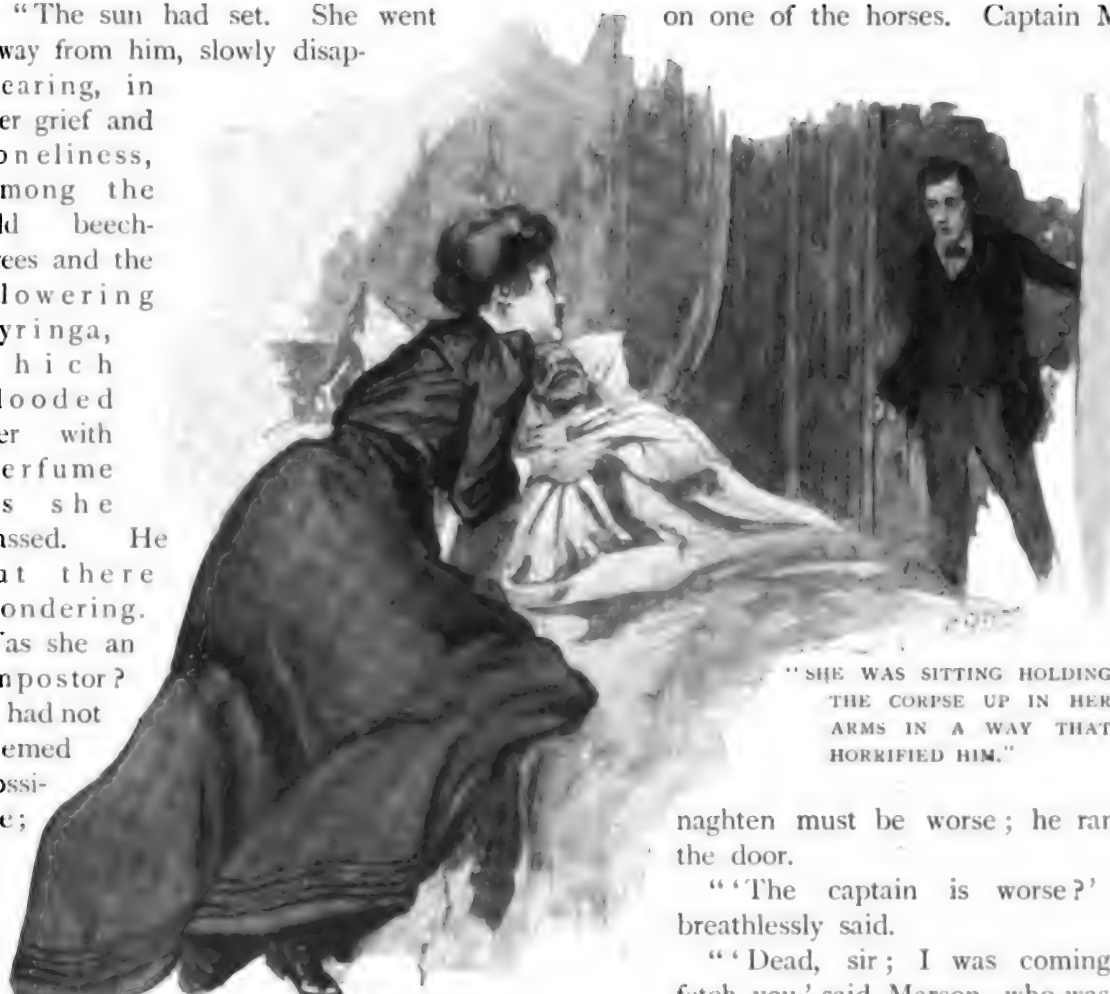
"'I have it.'

"The sun had set. She went away from him, slowly disappearing, in her grief and loneliness, among the old beech-trees and the flowering syringa, which flooded her with perfume as she passed. He sat there wondering. Was she an impostor? It had not seemed possible;

it still did not seem so. Marson knew all about her—knew that his master desired to marry her. The will, though unsigned, was indubitably genuine. The whole story hung together completely; there was nothing improbable in it. Brice had actually been in Edinburgh at the time she gave; there had actually been a Lord Gray Hotel in Arbutus Square. But what was to be done? What would the law say? It had been the very phantom of a marriage.

What a curious woman she was! How interesting! How unlike any other woman he had met!

"He knew she had never loved Alfred Brice. Why was he glad to think so? He wondered vaguely at himself for a fool. Meanwhile the twilight deepened, and at last he made up his mind that she was not coming back. He rose and strolled towards the house; as he did so, one of the men raced madly down the drive, mounted on one of the horses. Captain Mac-



"SHE WAS SITTING HOLDING THE CORPSE UP IN HER ARMS IN A WAY THAT HORRIFIED HIM."

naghten must be worse; he ran to the door.

"'The captain is worse?' he breathlessly said.

"'Dead, sir; I was coming to fetch you,' said Marson, who was on the steps. 'He died in her arms about five minutes ago. I feel very sorry for her, sir.'

"Basil stood in the middle of the hall in deep reflection. He had no right to go near her. But she was a woman, and she was alone; there was nobody else to offer sympathy, and so far as he knew she was the only approach to a relative he had in the world. He went up to the room at the end of the east passage.

"She was sitting holding the corpse up in

her arms in a way that horrified him. She manifested no surprise at sight of Basil.

" 'He is not dead,' she said rapidly, 'only unconscious; they have gone for the doctor. Won't you unscrew the oxygen cylinder; nurse is so unkind, she won't do it.'

"He went up to her, and very quietly and deliberately unlocked her hands from their hold. He was big and strong, and she seemed to yield at once to his authority. He laid the little shrivelled body of the old man upon the pillow, and closed the eyelids with the touch of one who has looked on death before, not once nor twice.

"When he turned round, she had got upon her feet.

" 'My arms are empty,' she said, with a gesture of desolation and an immeasurable bitterness in her voice. 'It is you who have taken him, taken all—all! What have I left? Not even my self-respect.'

" 'You must not say such things,' said Basil. 'What did I say that you should so accuse me? I have never breathed a word that could injure you. I believe in your claim with all my heart. I am not a curmudgeon. Go and rest now; you are overwrought. Rest, and leave him to his rest.'

"He took her hand to lead her from the room; she offered a feeble, unreasoning resistance. He put his arm round her waist as if she had been his sister, led her out, and locked the door behind him.

" 'If you have nobody but me, I must do all I can,' he said. 'Let me see to everything for you. You must not worry about anything; all you have to do now is to rest.'

" 'Rest!' she repeated. 'Much you know about it!'

"Another funeral—a very simple one this time—passed from Charton Field down the quiet village street. Basil and Mrs. Brice, who had not seen each other since the night of the death, walked behind with Mr. Cornford, who wished to show this token of respect.

"Basil, detained in the church to pay fees and so on, missed the other two, and strolled back to the house alone. When he walked in to the hall, Mrs. Brice, in her

travelling-things, was standing by the window, and her trunks, ready strapped, were piled upon the floor. She turned to him.

" 'Will you give me five minutes' talk before I go?' she asked.

"He felt bewildered.

" 'Before you go?'

"But mechanically he followed her into the drawing-room.

" 'Am I very dull?' he asked. 'I did not in the least realise that you would feel it necessary to go.'

" 'Very likely. You will realise it completely in the next ten minutes.'

" 'If there are only ten minutes,' said Basil, 'I must have the first say, please. What I want to tell you can be said in two. It is simply that I have decided, whether the marriage can be proved or not, that you must have a wife's share. It would save time and much expense, if you did not mind receiving it in the form of a gift from me. Mr. Cornford agrees. He is as sure as I am that you are legally entitled to it, and that it would be your cousin's wish that you should have it; but he thinks the marriage is going to be a hard thing to prove. As things now stand you have hardly any claim the law could recognise. If you will agree to leave things as they are—I to administer the estate, and be heir—I will appoint you your fair share, and you will have it with very little delay. If we have to wait to advertise in New Zealand papers and so on, it may take months and months. There, that is my say; do you agree?'

"She stood before him, looking him steadily in the eyes.

" 'You are willing to share with me, with no proof of my claim?'

" 'That's it, exactly.'

" 'I wish you had not spoken first,' she replied in a vexed tone.

"He was astonished.

" 'Now,' she went on, 'it will seem as if my confession was extorted by your generosity, but that is not so. I asked you to come in here that I might humiliate myself—that I might see your face as you looked at me and knew me for a liar. I am not Alfred Brice's wife. There never

was a marriage. I deceived him throughout. I have deceived you, too. Oh! . . . This is even worse than I anticipated. Don't look like that—don't!

"I will turn my back, if you prefer it," he said gravely; 'but I must hear all, please.'

"He fetched a chair, and she sat down. He remained standing. She plunged on abruptly:

"When I engaged myself to Alfred Brice," said she, 'I not only did not like him, I actually disliked him; his very touch was hateful to me. But he gave me no peace—he never let me alone. I engaged myself to him as one might ensure one's life, because I knew when my father died I should be a beggar—because I feared starvation. I kept it secret not because I feared to tell my father, but because I well knew that if

I told him he would insist on my making so good a marriage at once. His life was all that stood between me and Alfred Brice. But I did realise how meanly I was behaving, and I was miserable. Then at last came a letter that touched my heart. I made up my mind that it was my duty to go to him, and I told my

father. Next morning I saw the death of my *fiancé* in the papers. My father's rage, that I should have played for two years with my chance and lost it, was terrible. Then this plot flashed into his head. I was to write a letter as though I really had been Alfred's wife. I did it. I knew of no other heirs, and I certainly believed

Alfred would have wished me to have the money. When I saw you, I began to realise the fraud. But how could I then draw back? Could I take my father, in his weakness and pain, back to

poverty, cold, hardship? . . . You will say I might have confessed—might have thrown myself on your mercy. Oh, but I have some pride!

. . . It was easier to face you and tell lies than to face you and beg for pity for two liars! But my father's death makes it all easy. There

is no need to keep up the deception now. . . . That is all I need tell you, I think; the fly from the station should be here.'

"He had been standing with his face averted, seeming to listen with every part of him; now he turned to her with a curious light in his eyes.



"SHE WOULD HAVE RUSHED FROM THE ROOM, BUT BASIL . . . CAUGHT HER AND HELD HER FAST."



"‘Everything grows clear,’ he said slowly.

"‘Do you remember my asking you who you were?’ she asked.

"‘Yes, as if you were presenting a pistol to my head. You knew, then, that he was dead?’

"‘I knew; I am quite an actress, am I not?’

"‘You did not altogether deceive me; I felt there was something. I thought it was simply that you didn’t care for him, and that his death was more or less of a relief to you. I explained it that way to myself. You did not care about him, did you?’

"‘I have told you that I did not,’ she said, making a determined move to the door. He followed, and stood before her.

"‘Have you ever cared about anyone?’

"She shook her head.

"‘Do you think you could care about me?’

"She violently started back from him. ‘No, no, no!’

"She would have rushed from the room, but Basil, who was both ardent and unpractised, not knowing the usages of politeness, and intent upon explanations, caught her and held her fast. He knew that he was behaving curiously; but one thought ruled his mind—namely, that he could not part with her.

"‘Why not? Answer me,’ he said. ‘Tell me why not.’

"‘You would despise—an—adventuress,’ she panted.

"‘Oh, that is my opinion of you, not your opinion of me! Now keep to your own side of the question, please. Do you dislike me?’

"‘I think your—manners—very peculiar,’ she gasped.

"‘Is my touch hateful to you?’ pursued this terrible young man.

"‘O Basil,’ she faintly said, ‘let me go . . . I have been through so much.’

"‘That is just why I can’t; you mustn’t go. I have nobody but you; you have nobody but me. I don’t see that what you told me alters the state of affairs a bit. The marriage couldn’t be proved, and the rest is all of it true. He meant you to have it all, if you would come to him; and you had made up your mind to do that before you heard of his death, had you not?’

"‘Yes, I had.’

"‘Then it all belongs to you.’

"‘No, to you.’

"‘If you belong to me, it all belongs to me.’

"‘Oh, if you put it that way!’ said Chrissie faintly.

"‘I put it this way,’ said he.

"‘It was on her lips.’

*(To be continued.)*



ONE OF THE PRIZE DRAWINGS IN COMPETITION NO. V.



## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### IV.

**I**NTIMACY was making great strides among the Relations by this time. But if there was one of them more universally popular than another, it was perhaps the Elderly Cousin.

A portion of the warmth of feeling which he excited among all may perhaps have been due to the persistent way in which Sir George continued to bully him. As at first they had found themselves in a kind of conspiracy to encourage Mrs. Hogben, so now they united to present a firm front against the aggressive vegetarian, and to let the humble little man who did so much for their comfort and pleasure feel that his efforts were appreciated.

A magnificent frost, without snow, had put the finishing stroke to the happiness of the younger members of the party, for there was a large pond in the grounds of Titherleigh, and the ice was excellent.

"It is curious how the state of affairs appears to leave Sir George out in the cold," observed Stainley to Agatha as they glided over the glassy surface together. "Nine against the Socialist! It is almost as bad as Seven against Thebes."

"He makes things so difficult," said Agatha. "If we tried to be the least bit nice to him, he would tell us we were truckling to his title. His mind works that way."

"He is a characteristic product of his age," remarked the Minor Poet thoughtfully. "I believe him to be entirely dominated by the desire to make people sit up. His life is one ceaseless effort to say or do the unexpected."

"It must be very tiring for him," said Agatha.

"But it's most entertaining for us," responded her companion.

She laughed.

"Then you have not been as much bored as you expected by your stay at Holycleugh?"

Stainley made no answer at all; he just turned his head and looked into her clear eyes. She seemed to understand, for she laughed again, and answered as if he had spoken.

"Well, but you know you expected to be."

"And I should have been, had you been of the recognised Girton type—excellent,

but purposely plain; the mind admirably furnished, the clothes ill-cut; brimful of work, but not having learned to play; filled with intellect, devoid of humour—the brown bread of life—yes, all the contents of the medicine-chest, too, but no mince-pies, no chocolate-creams; potatoes, but no roses.”

“How disgustingly unfair! Some of the prettiest girls I know were at Girton.”

“They learned there, then, to conceal their prettiness most effectually. What is the use of being pretty if nobody knows it?”

“You would know if you had any discrimination.”

“But I haven’t—there’s the point; no man ever has. When will women learn that? Not one man in a hundred will enter a shop which has no attractive wares in the window. By the way, when are you going to tell me something about your early life?”

“It is not interesting,” she replied. “I have had but one adventure, and that is not much, but so improbable that nobody

believes it. However, you will have a chance to judge for yourself to-night, for I am going to give it as my contribution to the amusement of the Relations.”

“Is it a ghost story?” he begged to know.

“You can give me your opinion on that head when you have heard it. I am in doubt myself. It is just the story of how I came to know the Miss Blathwaytes.”

And so, when the time arrived, she began her story, with no other prelude than:

“I follow the fashion, and am autobiographical.”

### The Blathwaytes.

“THE way in which I came to know the Blathwaytes was most commonplace. It was at Ilfracombe, whither the doctors had sent me to get better after a pretty severe attack of influenza. You all know that I am an orphan, and without brothers or sisters. There was nobody to go with me, so I went



"I WAS BUYING VEGETABLES AT THE STALL OF A DEAR OLD COUNTRY-WOMAN."

alone, and chose Ilfracombe, as not being far from the high-school, in the West of England, where I then taught.

"It was spring-time, and still rather cold weather. The place was empty and seemed very dull. My lodgings were uncomfortable in the sort of little negative ways of which one does not like to complain. The landlady was disobliging, and uninterested in a tenant who tried to do without extras. At the end of a week I was much bored, and felt hungry for someone to be kind to me.

"I was doing my frugal bargaining one market-day, and enjoying the bustle and increased number of people about in the picturesque market-place. I was buying vegetables at the stall of a dear old country-woman, when a pleasant voice behind me said :

"'What, gooseberries already! They can't have much flavour with them, you'd think!'

"Now this voice spoke with the accent of East Devon, which is by no means that of Ilfracombe. The letter 'r' at the end of 'flavour' was rolled, and the sound of the 'oo' in 'gooseberry' I cannot pretend to reproduce. The simple little speech seemed to touch in me some spring of feeling which vibrated almost too keenly. Tears sprang in my eyes; I felt as though I would like to throw my arms round the speaker and cry. I did not in the least know why. My mother, I knew, had spent her childhood in East Devon, and she used sometimes in the long ago to reproduce the dialect for my benefit. But this and my great loneliness put together hardly seemed enough to account for my sudden movement of spirit towards two complete strangers.

"I turned round. Two dowdy middle-aged women, both wearing gold-rimmed spectacles, stood there. They were neither young nor old, tall nor short, fat nor thin, handsome nor ugly; but their faces appealed to me as strongly as their voices had done. They looked good and they looked shrewd also; a smile lurked somewhere in eyes and lips.

"I thought I had never seen two more charming countenances. Standing aside, it was easy to pretend to be contemplating

the wares on the next stall while they made their purchases, and to follow them when they left the market; to sit near them when they rested on a seat on the way up the Capstone Rock, and even unobtrusively to notice the house they entered when they went home to dinner.

"All that day I hankered foolishly after those two ladies, and at night I dreamed of them.

"In my dream I stood beside a curious kind of piano—not like a modern one; something the shape of a grand, but much smaller, and different, somehow, altogether. The keys were old and yellow, and one of them—an E in the treble clef—had a bit of the ivory chipped off.

"A man sat at the piano with his back to me, playing a most curious tune. I took more notice of the tune than of the player; it was such peculiar music—a wild, excited kind of thing, with a cadence not easy to catch. I said in the dream: 'If you really want me to remember it, you must play it over and over again.' And he did. He sat there repeating and repeating it; and as I stood listening, in came the two ladies I had seen that day in the market, and one said: 'It is early for gooseberries,' and the other said: 'My dear, I advise you to wake; this is not a wise dream: don't dream it again. He cannot play properly, you know, because his arm is paralysed.' I made just the foolish, inconsequent kind of answer that one does make in dreams. I said: 'If you were to open the red baize door, I should hear twice as plainly.' I said this aloud, and the sound of the words awoke me. But even the most persistent efforts did not avail to recall to the waking memory one single note of the tune so vividly dreamt.

"Do you know the exasperation of trying to recall an air that has escaped you? I pursued my dream-melody all day; and when I saw the two steady-going sisters trotting up and down the parade with their work-bags and camp-stools, I felt ridiculously inclined to smile at them as I remembered their intrusion into my sleeping-hours, and my fatuous remark about the red baize door.



"IT WAS PERFECTLY DELIGHTFUL TO . . . SEE THEM SEATED IN THE LEAST UNBEARABLE CHAIRS,  
SENDING MILD BEAMS OF KINDLINESS THROUGH THEIR SPECTACLES."



"Fortune favoured me that very day. One of my two old dears dropped her shabby bag just as I was passing them. As I restored it to her, I burst forth into a petition to be permitted to carry it to the top for her. They both looked at me with singular benevolence as they consented. We panted upwards together, with talk which was fragmentary and spasmodic and anything but interesting; and when we sat down to rest, and they saw me gasping for breath, Miss Susan remarked kindly:

"I am afraid, my dear, that you are not very strong."

"This broke the ice, for I had to tell them of my illness and lonely convalescence. They were most reserved people, of a shrinking shyness greater than any I ever encountered; but by the time we returned to our respective quarters to dinner, they had falteringly confided to me that they had noticed me, and thought they would like to know me. I did not hear until long afterwards that Miss Julia dropped her bag on purpose. Talk with them seemed straightforward,—there is no other word to express what I mean. It was like talking to some new-found maiden aunts or other kinswomen, with whom reserve would have been ridiculous. I implored them to come to tea with me that very afternoon, and never did I prepare more gladly for any festival. I bought several kinds of cake and a jar of clotted cream; my landlady was disagreeable about my having friends, but I did not care a pin. It was perfectly delightful to sit awaiting them in a new gown which previously I hadn't had the heart to put on,—to watch them coming down the street in beaded cashmere mantles and such funny hats,—to let them in and see them seated in the least unbearable chairs, sending mild beams of kindness through their spectacles!

"I think my delight gave them little thrills of gratification and pleasure of a kind not very usual in their out-of-the-way life. They lived in a remote valley, a village called Bennistrand, near the sea. Their name was Blathwayte, and they were the last of their race.

"The following day we met again in the morning. I went to tea with them, and

the acquaintance made great strides. But the morning after that a bolt burst in my blue sky. Their time at Ilfracombe was up, they told me; they were going back to Bennistrand.

"I had experienced, when with them, the foolish kind of enjoyment which is supposed to belong only to those falling in love: living from one meeting to another, untroubled by any doubts as to how the situation might eventually develop. The sudden end thus put to what was at the time my one interest in life was depressing to the very verge of tears.

"We were all sitting together on a bench looking out to sea. The sisters were too occupied with a momentous issue which lay before them to notice my stricken aspect. They had made a great determination, and at last Miss Susan, in a paroxysm of shyness, dared to put it into words. It was neither more nor less than an invitation to go back to Bennistrand with them. There is no need to dwell upon my surprise and delight.

"To leave my glum landlady, hard bed, scanty meals, and solitude, for the society of these unaffected, good little ladies and the sweetness of their Devonshire home in spring! I accepted with such rapture of gladness as touched them deeply.

"We made our journey by dint of changing trains three or four times, and finally driving several miles through deep, mossy, ferny lanes in a country spangled with apple-blossom.

"The house was a funny little old place, set on a hillside, with a blooming garden round it. All was so restful, flowery, fragrant, that my very heart rejoiced. But the joy was mingled with a curious sense of mystery, for the very moment the threshold was crossed came a conviction that I did not then see the house for the first time. The feeling was so strong that it forthwith escaped in words.

"Oh, but I know this house,—yes, I have been here before; and I knew you two ladies,—you were familiar to me when I heard your voices first in the market-place. But I was never in Devonshire before. Used you to live anywhere else? Have you changed houses? It is the things about which seem so well known. This



miniature, it feels like an old friend; this bureau; this old footstool! What a quaint feeling!

"It was like seeing again, after long years, things known in early childhood, forgotten and then remembered; but nothing seemed more certain than that I had never before with the eyes of the flesh beheld either Bennistrand or its owners.

"They and the house had been stationary; both of them were born there. I had never been in the county of Devon until I went to Ilfracombe. Perhaps it was a remembrance of some previous incarnation.

"Nothing could be simpler than the life led by the two sisters. They kept only one maid indoors: outside there was a coachman and a gardener. We had tea at five: none of your microscopic caviare sandwiches and eggshell cups on a silver tray; but a solid meal at table, with clotted cream and 'Chudleighs,' and other delights. Supper came at nine, then prayers and bed. The peaceful evening was passed in the dining-room, where there was a wood fire. The sharp, pleasing smell of the wood smoke was homelike and familiar, though I had never to my knowledge sat before a wood fire in my life till then.

"I think they said something about the drawing-room being cold, or otherwise made excuse for not sitting there.



"HIS BACK WAS TOWARDS ME, AND HE WAS VISIBLE JUST FOR ONE FULL MOMENT."

"My bedroom was as cosy as could be, though all in the manner of a bygone day; a royal wood fire there also. The big four-poster was fragrant with lavender. I almost cried with pleasure as I lay down to rest. The journey had been tiring, and the sleep which came in that downy, fragrant bed was too deep, for many hours, to allow of dreams. But towards morning the stir of waking birds and, later, of servants moving in the paved stable-yard, reached the tired brain, and I slid into the dream of the old piano and the man who played the strange, weird music. To hear the air again was unlooked-for good fortune.

"I was keenly aware that it was the same

as before. An eager anxiety not to forget it this time awoke me, and, behold! the awaking did not break the chain of harmony. The notes flowed on, muffled, but perfectly audible; somewhere in the house someone was really playing, on a real piano, the melody which I had twice dreamed of. I sat up, wide awake. There was no delusion; for several minutes the music flowed on. A curious piece of telepathy, methought, that I should dream a real tune, which the ladies of whom I dreamt could really play! Nestling once more into the feathers, I drank in each note as it fell lightly on the down stillness, anxious to remember it, wondering whether the ladies would believe, were I to tell them, that I had in truth dreamed not merely *a* tune, but *that* tune; and so drifted off once more into dreamland, from which I was only roused by the maid pulling up the blind.

"‘Things grow still more wonderful,’ was the form of my announcement at breakfast-time. ‘I have had such a curious experience. The first time we met at Ilfracombe I dreamed a remarkable dream, in which you both appeared; in that dream there was a queer tune, and that very tune one of you was actually playing this morning, very early—it awoke me, and I heard you.’

"Miss Julia smiled her kind little smile.

"‘A vivid dream,’ she said, ‘but only a dream, my dear; neither of us was playing this morning.’

"‘But I know I was awake!’ I cried. ‘I sat up in bed to listen! It must have been Martha.’

"‘You couldn’t have heard her if she had,’ smiled Miss Susan. ‘The piano cannot be heard from the room where you slept when the red baize door is shut.’

"‘*The red baize door!* I cannot describe how astonishing it was to hear her say that! A multitude of thoughts rioted in my brain as my tongue mechanically echoed the words.

"‘The red baize door! Is there really one?’

"Miss Julia stared.

"‘You must have noticed it—at the end of the passage where your room is, closing it off from the rest of the house.’

"Both ladies looked at me with a questioning, kind glance. I felt that they must

consider me to be behaving in a rather curious way. The only thing to do was to relate the twice-dreamed dream. At the description of the man playing, one little fluttering glance passed from Miss Susan to Miss Julia—momentary, but it was intercepted and remembered. The recital finished, they both agreed that to dream the same tune twice was wonderful—if dear Agatha was quite sure that it *was* the same tune? Also, that the red baize door should be dreamt of before seen was, to say the least of it, remarkable. But that the piano was played that morning was quite a mistake. ‘Ask Martha,’ was Miss Julia’s suggestion, ‘if the piano was played; she was about, and must have heard it.’

"It may not be so with everybody, but with me it is the case that my senses, earnestly assured that they are deceived, begin to distrust themselves. By the end of the day it seemed pretty certain that it could have been only a dream. I did actually ask Martha if she had heard the piano early that morning, and was rewarded with a blank stare of unquestionable surprise.

"‘Pianner’s locked,’ she vouchsafed. ‘Miss Blathwayte, she keeps the key.’

"This seemed finally to decide the dream character of the sounds.

"But next morning again the music awoke me—broke into a dream which had no connection with it, a dream in which I was vainly trying to pass a bit of bread to a starving man through the bars of the drive-gate at Bennistrand.

"I lay listening for a while, and for the first minute or two my mind was chiefly occupied over the question of what could be the motive of the two ladies in trying to make me think I could not hear. Then, slipping out of bed, and throwing my dressing-gown about me, I noiselessly crept down the passage and opened the red baize door.

"At once the sounds were sweeter and clearer. They did come from the drawing-room, I felt sure. I stood there wide awake, listening, perhaps for three minutes, perhaps for four; then, hearing Martha’s step in the hall and the clink of her pail, scurried back to bed again.

"I said no more to the old ladies. They doubtless had their reasons for wishing to conceal this fact from me; and yet it was puzzling. Martha was a very simple country-woman; I could have sworn that she spoke sheer truth when she said there had been

thoroughly, healthily tired, and slept as well as any girl could possibly sleep; but next morning again that same tune banished sleep with its queer, persistent sweetness, and so on the following two or three mornings.

"At last I made up my mind: I was



"THE NOTES DROPPED FROM THE FINGERS AS THOUGH THEY HAD PLAYED THE SAME AIR EVERY DAY FOR YEARS."

no music. Could it really be that I was cultivating delusion? I had heard of people who were haunted by imaginary sounds and persons. If so, Bennistrand was the best possible place for curing the mind of all unhealthy tendencies. We passed the most delightful day in the sunny garden and driving about the country. I went to bed

going to see the player, and, if there was no player, to set myself to conquer incipient madness.

"It was very early—nobody yet astir; the lovely dawn sunlight was just pouring its first rays upon the sleeping world—it was too early even for Martha—as I slipped downstairs without a sound.

"You will remember that I had not as yet so much as entered the drawing-room. It was almost dark inside, but above the window-shutters an unshuttered space, several inches wide, let in light enough to show the outlines of furniture. Before me was a sort of anteroom, a wide archway leading into a larger room beyond. I was thus at some distance from the piano and the man who played upon it. His back was towards me, and he was visible just for one full moment; then the music stopped abruptly, and there was nobody to be seen.

"Alone in the intense stillness of the sleeping house, courage failed. Softly closing the door, I fled back to my bed, where I cowered down with chattering teeth, and lay, saying over and over again to myself: 'I have seen a ghost! I have seen a ghost!'

"It was my full intention to relate this experience to my two hostesses at breakfast-time, but on second thoughts I said nothing. They were so kind that it seemed inconsiderate to distress them; and they might consider that some sort of inquiry into my mental state should be made. All that morning I felt sick and queer; and as luck would have it, that very afternoon we had visitors, and used the drawing-room for the first time during my visit. It was evidently very little used, and had a more faded, old-world aspect than the rest of the house. The piano was a most curious old instrument, such as Lady Catherine de Burgh might have kept in the housekeeper's room.

"The visitors begged for a little music. Miss Susan, with a reluctance very visible to me, unlocked the piano, and I sat down. For one long moment my fascinated gaze rested on the yellow keys, while curious unaccustomed heart-thumps stirred within—for the ivory of an E key in the treble clef was chipped.

"This creepy, hair-lifting sensation must be shaken off. Though feeling as if tangled in the convolutions of a scheme which could not be unravelled, I pulled myself together and began to play. How aggressive, how out of sympathy, sounded the modernity of Grieg and Chopin! The egotism of our present habit of thought stood out in curious

relief. For a moment it seemed as if I tasted the experience which has never yet come to anyone—that of looking on his own century with the mind and heart of a bygone day.

"... It was all wrong; there was only one thing to be played upon those long-silent keys—the wild, untamed refrain which now rushed back upon the memory like the Red Sea flowing once more between accustomed banks. The idea met with obstinate resistance for a time, but it was too strong; it broke in upon whatever else was attempted. All the notes shivered into silence.

"'Oh, do go on, my dear; you are giving me so much pleasure!' said the vicar's dear old wife.

"In sudden determination I raised my head. Why should I not play it? Nobody but myself would know that it was a ghost melody which filled the air; nobody but myself had been disturbed by the mysterious music in the early dawn.

"The notes dropped from the fingers as though they had played the same air every day for years.

"Miss Julia sat quite close to the piano, in talk with the vicar. I could see her as I sat. When the full tide of the melody reached her, her voice ceased as if strangled in her throat. Her near-sighted eyes dilated—I saw her whiten. The whole murmur of talk in the room ceased—probably on account of the sudden pause of the two sisters. On the silence the wild, piercing tones gamboled and frisked; the old piano gave out a richer, fuller response to the touch; the sweet May air hummed with the freakish sound.

"It ended, as it always had done in my dream, on a note that seemed to ask a question. It must end there; there was no more of it to come.

"Then for the first time I knew that I had made a great effort. Tremblings seized me. I rose from the stool, put up my hands to my eyes, felt the strange, mounting suffocation that means faintness, and with an exertion of will reached a big easy-chair, wherein I fell in complete unconsciousness.

"When my eyes opened, the soft air from

the terrace, tulip-scented, was fanning my face. The visitors were gone; the Miss Blathwaytes sat near, looking at me with such strange faces, such eager flutterings, half fascinated, half terrified. They said nothing until I had quite recovered—had sat up, smiled, apologised, owned that I must still be less strong than I had given myself credit for. But at last the question that trembled upon their lips would not be restrained, but burst forth.

“‘My dear, where did you hear that tune?’

“‘Do tell us.’

“‘It’s of the greatest interest to us!’

“‘Have you the music here?’

“I looked at them both earnestly. So the tune was familiar to them? It was puzzling. Both were so evidently the soul of truth, yet both had emphatically declared that I could have heard no music from their piano.

“‘I never saw it written down,’ I said, bewildered. ‘It is the tune that the man with grey hair plays here every morning early; you know I told you that I had heard him the first morning I was here? He always plays it; I hear him every morning.’

“Their eyes met in a long, close look; they were searching for the meaning of this.

“‘But you couldn’t, dear,’ said Miss Susan softly.

“‘But apparently you have, since you recognise it. What makes you say I couldn’t?’

“The habitual shyness made it terribly hard even to allude to such a thing; but at last it came out. Nobody but a Blathwayte had ever heard that tune; not even themselves had seen the player.

“No servant, no visitor, no friend had ever before been conscious of what the two sisters were accustomed to hear most mornings of their lives. But to make assurance doubly sure, they always put visitors in the room where I slept, because the sound of the piano could not be heard there when the red baize door was shut. I afterwards proved the truth of this assertion. When the piano was actually played I could not hear it in my room with the doors all shut; but the ghost-music I heard distinctly. The circumstance moved them profoundly.

They were quite ready to argue that, since I heard what they heard, I must be a relation.

“Then and there, sitting in the haunted drawing-room, where they never sat without company, because they were nervous little souls, they told me the story of their Uncle Frederic, genius and musician.

“Their grandfather, who built Bennistrand, was a successful man of business. He had two sons, whereof Frederic, the elder, was his favourite. But, as so often happens, Frederic utterly declined to bow his head to the commercial yoke which his father had prepared for him. All his taste, all his power lay in a direction which the old man could not understand. All through his wayward boyhood the conflict of wills raged. When he grew up he finally rebelled, and since no money would his father spend to help him in his career, he started alone and without a penny, to conquer the world with his talent.

“But the world seemed ignorant of him. For years no word from him came to the remote valley, no mention of his name in a paper, no letter or message to the old home. Fifteen years passed like this, and then one day he appeared—came as a beggar to the door from which as a beggar he had impetuously burst forth. His failure to conquer the world was explained by the very sight of him. Privation and anxiety acting on a delicate constitution had broken down his health, and he was attacked by creeping paralysis. One arm was helpless. His father was absent when he arrived. His younger brother had been for several years master of the house in all but name. He ordered Frederic to be turned from the door. It is to be hoped that he did not understand how ill he was, or even that the wanderer wrongly interpreted the message brought by a servant, and went away in a fit of anger. He only reached the little village inn, where he was attacked by pneumonia, and died in a day or two. His father, frantic with grief, was by his bedside most of the time; but he never was able to speak, though there were moments when he greatly seemed to wish to do so. Nothing of where he had been or what he had done



transpired—nothing of any ties which he might have formed. But the family had always thought it very likely that he was married, because they believed his pride would have prevented his returning home to beg for himself.

“His death seemed to throw a shadow of ill-luck over the house. Nothing that John, the younger son, undertook prospered. At the time of Frederic's death he had two daughters, baby girls, Susan and Julia. A fortnight afterwards a son was born, who lived but two hours; and he never had another.

“The money his father had made was dissipated in ill-advised business undertakings. At the time of my visit to Bennistrand the two sisters were living on an annuity, in which, as they believed themselves to have no relations, they had sunk their small capital.

“The great question was, Could I be related to Frederic Blathwayte?

“It is not impossible, but it is a question which can never be decided. My mother

was an only child; she could not remember her father. Her own mother always lived in the house of her parents, my maternal great-grandfather being a doctor in a small town not far from Exeter. I never remember hearing anything much about my mother's relations. Only one thing I knew for certain—namely, that mother's maiden name was not Blathwayte; so that if Frederic was really her father, he must have married her mother under another name. This is of course possible, and the dear old ladies love to think so. At their death I shall inherit their family portraits and other small treasures. I am bound to say that none of the pictures bear the least resemblance to me in the face, except, perhaps, one of Frederic himself, taken when he was a child.

“There is only one thing to add, and it is to be feared that you will all think it ridiculous; it is simply this: that I cannot remember or play the ghost melody except upon the old piano at Bennistrand.”

*(To be continued.)*

G. M. Robins



*From photo by H. F. Piggott, Leighton Buzzard.*

MOEL LEABOD, NORTH WALES.





## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### V.

THE next day was Sunday.

The Hosier's Wife, whose husband was of the Baptist persuasion, had duly provided herself with the liturgy of the Church of England as a necessary part of one's outfit when visiting a landed proprietor.

She was somewhat shaken to find that Sir George betook himself to the billiard-room and Dr. Hardy to the library after breakfast, and inclined to be a little offended when Cousin Hobson said he had ordered the horses to drive her to the Baptist Chapel at Holycleugh.

However, as she could not deny that her ordinary tastes lay in that direction, and as driving to chapel in a carriage appeared considerably more to her imagination than walking to the Established Church across a field-path, she departed, while Cousin Hobson and Stainley Rivers escorted Mrs. Locke, Miss Mayne, Miss March, and the Barings to the tiny Norman church which lay within sight of the windows of Titherleigh.

Strolling back in the frosty sunshine, they

paused to admire the fine sweep of country visible from the high ground on which they stood.

"Surely," said Stainley, "we are not far from Weirdale as the crow flies?"

"It lies about fifteen miles to the south-west of us," replied the Elderly Cousin. "In fact, this country where we now stand is the actual scene of David Harkness's celebrated ride to Assize. It is a pity the story is so well known, or I might narrate it as my share of this evening's amusement."

To his astonishment all his hearers were ignorant of the story to which he alluded.

"If you had lived in this part of the world, you must have heard it," he said reflectively; "and yet I don't know. Things are so soon forgotten; a brave act grows out of date."

"A brave act is never out of date," said Agatha sweetly, if somewhat tritely. "I hope you will tell us about David Harkness."

Cousin Hobson seemed a good deal pleased.

"I had feared," he murmured, "that when it came to my turn, as it does this

very night, I should have to confess myself unable to amuse you all; but as the stories have frequently tended in the direction of the supernatural (I ask pardon, Miss Mayne, I should say supernormal), I almost think I may venture, since it was my own ancestor whom David rode to save."

Accordingly that evening the party once more assembled round the drawing-room fire in the pleasant warmth and good temper engendered by a good dinner, and in tremulous tones the Elderly Cousin began to tell the story of

### The Weirdale Assize.

"My story is more than a hundred years old," began Cousin Hobson. "My maternal great-grandmother was a Vaulx, of Weirdale; and when, as a little chap, I was taken to see her daughter, my own grandmother, I used to be much interested in a portrait which hung in her sitting-room. It gave you a fine man, in the prime of life, with black hair, a bronzed face, and light grey eyes which seemed to meet and sympathise with yours. His hand held a bridle; and a horse's head was introduced into the picture close to his own; he looked as though about to mount and ride. I learned to call the horse Norseman, and his rider David Harkness—the man who saved my great-grandfather's life.

"As I grew older, my grandmother told me more. What she told I then wrote down that I might remember it. I give it you, not varying in fact from what my grandmother gave me plainly to understand was the truth as it actually happened.

"To the west of Weirdale there still stands an old-fashioned, gabled, timbered inn, known as the Barley Mow. The town, year by year overrunning its boundaries, has long since reached it and flowed beyond it into suburbs. It is practically in the middle of houses now; but when David Harkness first beheld it, there were close upon two miles of green hedgerows stretching between the Barley Mow and the first houses of Weirdale, the whole two miles being then the property of the Vaulx—long since sold, cut up into

lots; the old Mansion House, even in my grandmother's day, had disappeared.

"The Barley Mow stands back from the road, and in those days a row of pollard limes stood before it, under which were green benches, always well filled on summer evenings; and here, on a certain quiet golden May sunset sat David Harkness, commercial traveller, or drummer, as they called him in those days, waiting, with bread, cheese, and a tankard of excellent ale, to give his good horse Norseman a rest before continuing his journey.

"The man was slightly over thirty at this period of his fortunes. He was the only son of a beneficed clergyman whose early death had left widow and child almost destitute. With his father's death, David's chance of gentle breeding had disappeared. They had no rich relations, no interest. As soon as the boy was old enough he had to work to support his mother; I believe the only schooling he had was what she gave him. But his character—gentle, strong, loyal, patient—had earned for him, while still a young man, a position of trust in the firm to which he had been bound apprentice.

"He was a stranger in those parts; they lay considerably farther north than he had as yet pushed the fortunes of the house he served. He was there to exploit Weirdale, which even then was a rising place; and it was his intention, if successful, to carry the interests of his employers over the Border, taking advantage of those long summer days the absence of which made travelling difficult before the days of railroads.

"He sat idly and at ease under the tender green of the newly spread lime-leaves, noting half absently the attitude of scowling misery of a young man, who looked half tramp, half gipsy, and who was seated at the other end of the same table, his head for the most part hidden in his hands.

"It seemed curious that such a disreputable character should be tolerated there among the honest carters and brawny field-labourers who lounged about the peaceful place. But he was evidently well known, for nobody took any notice of him; and David marked that pretty Eliza Foy, the daughter of mine host, coming in her

dainty lilac print gown, drawn up through the pocket-holes over a green petticoat, with a plate of bread and meat, had laid her other hand, as she put down the food, half kindly, half pityingly on the shoulder of the outcast, with the maternal touch a kind woman gives to a man in trouble.

"Of a sudden there was a clatter of hoofs on the dry road, and three riders going in the direction of Weirdale drew rein at the Barley Mow. Two of them were young men of fashion, one of whom, singularly handsome, wore the king's uniform; the third was a beautiful girl.

"They were so close to David that he could have touched the silky nose of the girl's blood mare; and as she sat, so remote and queenly, balancing her light grace upon the saddle, and lifting one hand to feel whether her plumed hat were disarranged, her eyes met those of the handsome drummer—met full his gaze of reverent admiration.

"Her little head, outlined against the rose and apricot of the sunset, was like that of an angel in a picture of early Florence. David looked on her as Dante may have looked on Beatrice; and all but the girl's face faded from his brain.



"LIFTING ONE HAND TO FEEL WHETHER HER PLUMED HAT WERE DISARRANGED, HER EYES MET THOSE OF THE DRUMMER."

"The plainer of the two gentlemen who rode with her was Bertrand Vaulx, the squire's only son, a man with a dark, strongly marked face, its expression indicating either sulkiness or depression. He bore a message for Luke Foy concerning cider for his father's haymakers; and he leaned from his saddle to give the order, while his cousin, the young officer, made eyes, behind his companions' backs, at pretty Eliza, in what I suppose to have been the approved style of a young blood in the days of the Regency. David was called from his golden dream by a low growl, like

distant thunder, from the ragged young man at the other end of the table, who, with clenched fists, was glaring at the captain with a look of hate which spoke plainer than words.

"Olivia Tempest, the beautiful girl on horseback, saw none of these things. She had averted her eyes from the eloquence of David's, and sat gazing along the dusty road, with its fresh green hedgerows, displaying a profile clear as a cameo, etched out against the light in the skies behind.

"David could not forego the pleasure of watching her; he sat like a man under a spell, with head uncovered and heart throbbing, during the few wild minutes that young Vaulx's interview with the innkeeper lasted; and then, as the riders turned away, as she lifted her mare's head from the drinking-trough, she let one more glance fall sweetly upon her devotee, like one who well knows that the gift will not be misused.

"His eyes followed the party, suffused with the moisture of an emotion never stirred in him before. In after years he used to say it had been like a vision of the Grail; for he was a studious fellow, and his father had bequeathed him a copy of Malory.

"His soaring thoughts were brought home again by the sound of some curious formula—it might have been an incantation—which the man who sat at his table was murmuring in a low voice.

"He had taken out of his pocket a little package, and, holding it to his heart, was reciting softly under his breath, his gleaming eyes fixed upon the figures of the riders disappearing down the shady road.

"'Hey, friend, what's that?' says David in astonishment.

"The fellow turned on him the queerest face, the eyes glowing with hatred, on the mouth the dreadful, crooked travesty of a smile.

"'That's a curse, Mr. Englishman,' said he in English, but with a curious accent. 'You don't understand 'em in England—can't make 'em; we Sicilians can. I pray the Saviour that my enemy may never know a moment's happiness in this life and that he may be damned eternally in the next.'

"As he spoke he had hastily collected Eliza's

dole of bread and meat in a handkerchief, and so rising, jerked himself away, slouched round a corner of the inn, and disappeared.

"A curious element in this Arcadian place.

"'My girl, who was the lovely lady on horseback?' David presently asked Eliza, who came to remove his empty tankard.

"'That's Mistress Olivia Tempest,' replied the girl. 'She is a beauty, isn't she? The squire's ward, she is, and an heiress into the bargain. Both of 'em want her. Mr. Vaulx is her cousin. Captain Germiston owns land near here.'

"'Which will she have?' said David slowly.

"'Oh, the captain, saints grant!' cried the girl with a frank laugh. 'He's a picture, isn't he? Mr. Vaulx don't suit my fancy; seems always in the sulks.'

"'Who was the tramp, or gipsy, who was sitting here a while ago?' was the drummer's next question.

"'What, Tonio?' she sighed. 'Poor Tonio! We're all sorry for him. His father was as English as the best of us, but married some outlandish woman that come from overseas in Mrs. Vaulx's service. There was two children, Tonio and Theresa. Theresa was reckoned a beauty, but I don't know—some likes them dark ones'; and there was a pretty flush on the rose-leaf cheek as the girl stole a glance, girl-like, at the handsome drummer. 'But she was a bad girl, and she ran away nobody knew where. Poor Tonio, who took care of her, the parents being dead, was like one mad. He went away to seek for her, and after a few months he came back alone. Ever since then he has been as you see him. He never said a word of where he had been or what he had done; most think he went to London. But he's gentle enough; there's no harm in him.'

"'Poor chap! you do well to be kind to him,' said David as he laid down his modest reckoning, with a trifle for the girl. 'Maybe I shall pass this way again,' he added, with his pleasant smile. 'Keep a welcome for me.'

"As he rode down the road where lately her horse's feet had trod, and as he passed

the great gateway that led to the mansion house, he looked wistfully up the vacant drive, and there was a prayer in his heart that the lady of his dreams, who stood so far above his own reach, might never become the wife of Captain Germiston.

"It was the end of August before he returned from his northern venture, the results of which were so promising that he expected to have to return thither ere long. Weirdale was not precisely his nearest way home, but the undimmed memory of a fair face took him thither; it was possible that he might see her once again.

"A couple of days of stifling closeness had been followed by one of gathering storm, and on this night the wind was rising and moaning the knell of vanished summer, and he did not refuse Luke Foy's kindly offer of kindling the wood fire in the little inner or private room wherein he supped. Before it he sat smoking and conjuring up the green and golden May evening and the face of Olivia Tempest, with the aid of an imagination that was vivid enough, though repressed.

"At about ten o'clock the storm burst. The swishing cataract of the rain lashed



"THE ASTONISHED INNKEEPER RECOGNISED BERTRAND VAULX, STANDING THERE WET TO THE SKIN."

the dry soil with scourges, and hammered on the windows as though to break them. The roar of its descent was mingled with the streaming of the gutters, and soon with the rush of a great volume of water racing down the road. Continually the thunder crackled like heavy artillery, the rain pelted like a hail of bullets, and through all swept the wind, cold and wild as with the chill of the coming winter."

"In the height of the storm there came a vehement knocking at the door. Luke, who was seated in the bar, wishing his guest

would go to bed, rose and unbarred the door with alacrity, for it was terrible to think of even a footpad being abroad in such a tempest. The tumult of the clamorous night burst in, the draught blew out the lamp, and it was only by the light streaming through the glass door of the inner room that the astonished innkeeper recognised Bertrand Vaultx, standing there wet to the skin, his hat gone, the long locks of his black hair streaked in confusion across his white face. He panted hard as Luke drew the bolts behind him.

"'Foy, there's not a dry thread on me,' he said. 'You must light a fire and dry my things.'

"Luke cried out to know how he came to be caught in such a tempest, and learned that he had been passing the evening at Squire Ainsworth's and was returning home on foot.

"'By great good luck there's a fire here, sir,' said Luke eagerly. 'The gentleman will oblige us, I'm sure.'

"He flung open the door of the inner room, and David rose. Young Vaultx made no apology and barely looked at him. He strode up to the fire, the water running out of his clothes as he moved, took up a position on the hearth, and held out his foot that Luke might unlace the saturated boot.

"For a minute or two David stood astonished at such discourtesy; but on a study of the young man's face his thoughts changed. It was preoccupation, not rudeness. Bertrand Vaultx was in the grip of a devouring passion. He barely noticed the landlord's attentions; his sombre dark eyes saw nothing of their surroundings. As David noted their fixed expression, the thought darted across his mind that those eyes held the same mental picture as his own—the same girl's face hovered before the two of them with its elusive beauty! The thought caused him not to envy but pity the young man; it seemed to draw them together with subtle chains of sympathy.

"He sat silently smoking until Luke had done all that he could for the unexpected guest, till he was attired in dry raiment and a glass of hot Hollands and water stood at his elbow; and when they were left to

themselves,—David did not choose to go to bed, but stood his ground, intent on having some talk with the intruder,—the eyes of this latter rested for the first time consciously upon the fine, prepossessing exterior of the drummer.

"'I've disturbed you, I fear,' says he, very stiff.

"'Yes, you have,' returns David pleasantly. 'But I rather like it. A storm like this makes one glad of company.'

"The young man assented briefly; then rose and set to pace the room. The thunder was still crashing; lamps and shutters failed to keep out the lightning.

"'We don't get much thunder here,' he suddenly burst out. 'The big range of hills to the north usually draws away the storms. The people hereabouts have a saying:

Thunder at night when the wind doth blow,  
Is evil for the House of Vaultx.

I'm a Vaultx.'

"'Are you also unlucky?' asked David, as he leaned forward to knock the ashes out of his pipe.

"'Before Heaven, yes!' cried the young man with energy. 'So unlucky that I'm now wondering why I took shelter here instead of remaining as a target for the lightning.'

"'Oh, pshaw! you're not a coward!' said David shortly. 'If I were you, Mr. Vaultx, I should not begin to curse my luck until the woman I loved was the wife of my rival.'

"Vaultx wheeled round and threw back his head.

"'What do you mean, sir, by your unfounded impertinence?'

"'What do you mean, sir, by your capricious confidences?' retorts David coolly.

"'Who are you?' asked Vaultx after a pause of extreme surprise.

"'I am a voice speaking to you out of the night, and telling you to be of good courage,' was the answer. 'You can know nothing of a woman's heart until she shows it to you, and that can be at your own request alone.'

"'Who are you?' asked Vaultx again in a bewilderment which showed David how nearly he had hit the mark.



“‘I am No Man,’ laughed David, who read his classics, as I told you before. ‘We hold speech to-night for the first time; in all probability also the last. I was sent here by your good angel with a message. Don’t resign without a struggle the woman who fills your every thought.’

“The young man came three steps nearer in trepidation.

“‘You are *clairvoyant*?’ he breathed.

“‘Don’t understand the word,’ replied David with composure; ‘but I know a good man from a knave.’

“‘A knave——’ Bertrand flung reticence to the winds; he was very young. ‘How can I tell her that he is a knave?’ he cried appealingly; and David answered, as though the conviction of the truth of what he said leapt into life within him:

“‘Make her so sure of the truth of your love that she will not need to feed her hungry heart with the fuel of his attentions.’

“‘You *are* clairvoyant!’

“‘I give you good advice.’

“‘The best!’ said Bertrand with new life in his tones; and while his eyes took fire at the torch of his kindling hopes, he cried again, ‘The best!’

“An hour later the stars were shining. They had sent Luke to bed, and had talked till they felt loth to part.

“David went to the door to see his new friend out. Bertrand had not again inquired for his name; his own future entirely absorbed him.

“‘The storm is over,’ said David, as they stood looking out into the glittering night, all the wet trees touched with the radiance of a waning moon. ‘It has cleared the air.’

“‘It has cleared my brain, too,’ replied Bertrand almost blithely. ‘This is the strangest experience of my life—that you should know my every thought!’ Even as he spoke a sound broke sharp and sudden on their ears—a sound that cut the silence with startling abruptness—the report of a pistol.

“‘Hark!’ said David. ‘Have you gentlemen of the road hereabouts?’

“Young Vaulx laughed.

“‘Poachers, more likely. But it is early

in the night for them to venture upon firearms.’

“As he spoke another shot was audible, after which silence.

“‘Early?’ said David, taking out his watch. ‘It is five minutes after midnight.’

“A glance at the clock in the bar and a comparison of their watches showed this to be the case.

“‘I must hasten home; and the man whom this afternoon I challenged to mortal combat I now feel inclined to merely laugh at! I almost think I am ready to beg his pardon. A man’s fate lies in his own hands,’ said Bertrand thoughtfully. ‘I am really extremely obliged to you,’ he added, with a laugh which was quite joyous.

“He looked at his grave companion, and then with an amusing touch of condescension in his cordiality held out his hand.

“‘Good-bye and God prosper you,’ said David, and watched the athletic young figure disappear, then raked out the fires and duly fastened bolts and bars before retiring to rest.

“The winter of that year set in early with severity. It overtook David in a remote part of the Lowlands of Scotland, and it was with difficulty and delay that he won his way south as far as his home—the cottage in a little Northumbrian hamlet, where his mother lived, surrounded by as much comfort as the untiring labours of this good son could supply.

“It was evening when he reached the place. His journey had been concluded the day before; but that day he had spent with his employers in the neighbouring town. Norseman had only been ridden a few miles, and was still fresh when he dismounted at his lowly door.

“His mind, as he used to tell my grandmother, was full of trade considerations, his Scotch arrangements filled him with interest, he had never felt less under the power of his imagination in his life.

“He retired to rest before ten after a moderate supper, and, going straight to bed, lay asleep in a moment. But about midnight he started from a vivid dream of Olivia Tempest’s face, pale and full of

agonised entreaty. It brought him broad awake in a moment, and he lay reflecting on a certain strangeness in the fact that she, who to him seemed the incarnation of all joy, should appear to him in sleep as though in woe. As he so lay reflecting he heard a sound like a horse treading the gravel beneath his window. But so unlikely was it that a horse should be there at that hour that he paid no heed until the sound was thrice repeated; and then he heard a man clear his throat.

"That brought him out of his warm bed and to the window.

"Outside in the moonlit frost stood Joshua Slade, the man in whose house David and his mother lived; he held Norseman saddled and bridled.

"Harkness pushed up the window.

"Slade, are you mad? What's this?"

"Slade looked up bewildered.

"Hey, sir?"

"What are you doing there with that horse at this time of night?"

"Obeying orders, sir," snapped Slade in injured tones. "Horse round at twelve sharp," was the word.

"Nonsense," said David; "go to bed. Where should I be going at this hour?"

"To Weirdale, sir; that's what you told me."

"To Weirdale! David remained a moment in blank surprise.

"Who gave you the order?"

"You gave me it yourself, sir."

"Now David had not so much as thought of Weirdale that day, and, moreover, it was too far for a ride without change of horse. What had put the word into Slade's mouth?"

"Afterwards, he never quite knew what swayed him—whether some curious desire to mount and ride overcame him, whether he did not like to seem ridiculous before the man, whether he recklessly wished to see if there was any reason why he should go to Weirdale; but the fact remains that, after a very short inward debate, he dressed himself, came downstairs, mounted Norseman, and rode away.

"He was wont to say that his own impression, at first, as he rode along, was that he was dreaming, and should awaken

to find himself in bed. But when he had ridden ten miles or so, he came in sight of the river, glimmering under the moon.

"Now indeed my wild-goose chase must end, if it be real. The ferryman goes home at ten, and as he lives across the water, I cannot call him."

"He reined in Norseman on the high bank and surveyed the silver flood. A dark object was rocking thereon. It was the ferry-boat, and as he gazed, the ferryman, catching sight of him, held up his hand with a gesture of impatience.

"It is a dream, then," thought David, as he guided Norseman down the slope and into the boat.

"You are late," said the ferryman. "I have been expecting you a long time."

"How did you know?" asked David, surprised at himself for feeling surprised at anything in a dream.

"The lady who crossed this evening left word," was the reply.

"The lady who crossed this evening!"

"As he walked his horse out of the boat and away, it occurred to him that perhaps somebody really had sent for him. But who should send in so strange a way? How came he not to see the messenger? . . . And ever as he rode he saw the face of Olivia Tempest as it had appeared in the vivid dream that woke him. But she could not have summoned him, for she knew neither who he was nor whence he came. The puzzle was beyond his powers of solution. When, a couple of hours later, he reined up at a turnpike, it scarcely surprised him to find the turnpike keeper at his post, with a bucket of water for his horse.

"Later, a more serious difficulty presented itself. Norseman began to flag.

"I may be a fool," reflected David, "but not such a fool as to ruin my good horse on a wild-goose chase like this."

"The moon had set, and the laggard winter dawn had not yet begun to break; it was dark and cold. A light glimmered on the road before him; it burned at the window of a small inn. As David drew rein, a man looked out of the door, nodded as one who understands, and ran round to the stable, whence he emerged leading a

horse by the halter, and began swiftly to unharness Norseman.

"‘You’ll have to push on, sir,’ he said urgently. ‘I’ve been looking for you this half-hour ; but the cob can go—take it out of him.’"

"‘Let me see, what time should I be there?’ says David, assuming an air as though he knew all about it.

"And the man made this strange reply :

"‘Court opens nine sharp.’"

"As the bewildered man urged his new horse onward, its hoofs seemed beating out that refrain :

"‘Court opens nine sharp—court opens nine sharp.’"

"Day broke slowly as he rode. He was growing tired, and no longer wondered, but centred all his energies upon reaching Weirdale by the appointed hour.

"But nine o’clock had already struck when he came in sight of the leafless pollard limes before the Barley Mow.

"‘Here,’ thought he, ‘I may receive enlightenment,’ and he dismounted and went in.

"The place looked desolate ; the door stood open, the bar was empty, there was no fire. He could hear, when he stood still to listen, a low sound of sobbing.

"He penetrated to the kitchen. There before the fire sat pretty Eliza Foy, her apron over her head, wailing miserably.

"The girl had not heard him enter. She started, dropped her apron, let her eyes rest upon him, then leaped to her feet like



"THE FERRYMAN HELD UP HIS HAND WITH A GESTURE OF IMPATIENCE."

one possessed, and shrieked and shrieked again.

"‘It is ! It is ! Now God be praised ! You are, sir, are you not, he that was here on the night of the great storm ?’"

"‘I am——’"

"‘Then don’t lose a moment—not a moment ! Mount ! Ride ! To the court-house ! Away ! A man’s life hangs on

your speed! A man's life—ay! and more than that!’

“A current of strange excitement pulsed through David. Memories of the roar of the tempest crowded to his brain and of the young haggard face of Bertrand Vaulx—of their talk together, and the young man's confession that he had challenged his rival, and of the deadly hatred which he bore him. The face that all night long had haunted him, pale and pleading, gleamed before him now. What had befallen these two people, so strangely brought into his alien life? . . . He did not pause to question the frantic girl, he let her seize his arm and hurry him back to where his horse waited. As in a dream he heard her indicate the direction he was to take.

“‘Down the High Street! Turn to your left—

“‘Court opens nine sharp!’

“It was just ten when he reached the court-house, where the half-yearly assizes were being held. There, he knew, the answer, the key to the puzzle, awaited him; but never was man less prepared for the reality.

“The place was easily found, for there was a crowd of people all across the street; but he did not ask for information—to get in was his business.

“The court was full; they barred his way. But David had not come so far to be balked now. He literally fought his way in, and the sound of the struggle at the doors caused heads to be turned in his direction and the high, strident tones of the counsel for the Crown to cease for a moment.

“It was a large, dingy place, with high, narrow windows. The part where the judges sat was dark, but the winter daylight shone full on the pale face of the prisoner in the dock, on his dark, backward-tossed hair and set mouth, and with a tingling shock that seemed to strike him like a buffet, David recognised Bertrand Vaulx.

“For a minute the stuffy place, the swarming faces swam before the weary eyes of the fasting man. He reeled—he felt as though his excitement must suffocate him.

“‘I am not drunk—I am not drunk,’ he

gasped out to an irate official who held him by the arm. ‘But I have ridden all night—’

“The lawyer had proceeded with his address, ignoring the momentary interruption; the sound of his voice drowned David's. What was it all about? He must listen, must understand. His eyes frantically searched the ring of folks about him in quest of some clue, some suggestion; and then from the far end of the room a face dawned upon him—the face of a girl who had risen in her place, and a pair of eyes, dilated with the torture of suspense, looked right into his. It was Olivia Tempest.

“He saw, knew, began to understand. Her lover was in danger; she needed David; she had sent for him.

“‘For God's sake tell me for what crime are they trying him?’ he whispered to the man who held him.

“‘For the murder of Captain Germiston on the night of August 31.’

“The mists had rolled away from David's brain. As he listened with all his might for the next words, he was acutely conscious of but one feeling—that he would have given anything, life, liberty, his good name, all that he prized, to be the prisoner in the dock, so looked upon and so loved by Olivia.

“And now he caught some part of the lawyer's speech.

“‘It is here that the case for the defence so lamentably breaks down. The moment of the murder can be accurately fixed. It rested with the prisoner simply to prove an alibi, and this he has failed to do. As I have before pointed out, the gamekeeper who heard the shots and found the body of Captain Germiston, about two hundred yards from the glade in the park known as the Queen's Glade, looked at the victim's watch when snatching it out to feel whether the heart still beat. It pointed to five minutes after midnight. Now the prisoner admits that he was on the worst possible terms with the dead man. He admits that there had been a violent quarrel that afternoon, the cause of quarrel being the affections of Miss Tempest, to whom, since the captain's death, Mr. Vaulx has become engaged. He admits that he

sent a challenge to the captain, whom he at that time believed to be his successful rival, and that the meeting was to have taken place next day. You have all heard that the captain, then a guest in the house, volunteered to walk a little way to meet Mr. Vaulx, who had been out in the storm, and for whose safety they were all alarmed. The prisoner has sworn that on his way home, after he left the Barley Mow, where

family is naturally great, asks you to believe that there was present that night, at the Barley Mow, a guest, a complete stranger; that he, Luke, went to bed about eleven o'clock, leaving this stranger in close talk with Mr. Vaulx, and relying on the promise of this man, whose very name was unknown to him, to make all fast for the night. Mr. Vaulx swears that at the moment of the murder he was standing in the doorway



"HE SAW HIS DREAM APPROACH HIM WITH OUTSTRETCHED HANDS."

he took shelter from the storm, he met no living creature. He has also sworn that at five minutes past midnight, the moment when the murder was committed, he had not left the Barley Mow. But here we lay our finger on the weak place. That Mr. Vaulx really did go to the inn to shelter from the storm, is correct enough; Luke Foy and his daughter can swear to it. *But at what time did he leave?* This is the point he must establish. Gentlemen of the jury, Luke Foy, whose affection for the Vaulx

of the inn with this mysterious person, and that they both heard the shot fired which killed Captain Germiston. Next morning this unknown goes his way unquestioned. How much, or how little, does this man know of what took place that night? And how is it that he has vanished into nothingness when his testimony, if it coincided with that of Mr. Vaulx, would have saved him? I ask you all, had such a witness existed, would they not have moved heaven and earth to produce him? Is it likely that he

could so conceal himself that offers of reward would fail to reach him, that no clue to his whereabouts should be forthcoming? It is necessary for me to point out to you that in not calling this all-important witness the prisoner has laid himself open to grave suspicion. Once again I ask, Where is he?’

“And at that word David lifted up his hand, and his strong voice penetrated to the far corners of the court as he cried aloud :

“‘I am here!’

“Well, I need not trouble you with details. You will guess that the real murderer of Captain Germiston was Tonio, and that the punishment was by no means wholly undeserved. David, who had witnessed the man’s curious outbreak at sight of the captain that far-off evening in May, was able to suggest this theory, which does not seem to have occurred to anyone else. Tonio, when arrested, not only confessed, but seemed proud of his vengeance. His mind was unhinged by want and misery. He did not live to undergo his punishment.

“David had only confused memories of the rest of the great assize day. He remembered being borne from the court shoulder high amid the hurrahs of the crowd; he remembered, but as in a dream, his triumphal progress through the streets as they carried him, by the young squire’s orders, to the mansion house. The whole events of that time were focussed for him in one glorious moment. It was when they had put him down at last, and he stood upon his feet in the great hall of Olivia Tempest’s home! Dizzy, bewildered, travel-stained, he stood there among armorial bearings, and dim, rich glass, and firelight and black oak.

“And it seemed as though a lane parted in the crowd that thronged him, and he saw his dream approach him with outstretched hands and smiling, tremulous mouth and wet eyes. Right up to him she came and lifted her arms, and with the finest proud humility she laid them about his neck, drew down his lofty head, and kissed him.”

When the Elderly Cousin ceased speak-

ing it could be seen that he was affected by the pathos of his own story. They allowed him a few moments in which to recover, and then besieged him with questions.

How was David summoned? Had Miss Tempest anything to do with it consciously? Who had carried the message to the ferry and the turnpike? What explanation had he to suggest?

He replied that Miss Tempest, who for weeks had been making every effort to find David, had retired to bed that evening with a mind entirely possessed by the passionate longing to communicate with him. She had a most vivid dream, in which she went and roused him from sleep, urging him to come to her at once. In this dream she so clearly saw his face that next morning, when she looked up in court and met his eyes, she recognised him. It is to be remembered that she had once seen David and looked at him with attention, though the incident had probably faded from her mind; and she did not for a moment identify the man who had looked at her with admiration in May with the mysterious stranger of whose conversation with Bertrand on the last night of August she had so often heard. In her dream she had roused the servant to saddle the horse, she had passed by road and river to prepare the way, and so vivid was the vision that when she awoke to find it unreal she wept bitterly.

“It was said,” concluded the Elderly Cousin, “that when she was afterwards taken over the route, she recalled the places and people. But such things grow in the telling, and for that part of the story my grandmother used to say she would not vouch. I think it not impossible that she really did dream David’s face, for this she had seen, and the brain held it, though the memory was not conscious of it. Moreover, it was at the Barley Mow that she had seen it, which may have produced some association of ideas——”

He broke off, for the Radical Member, who had for long been fidgeting sadly, arose abruptly and went towards the door. He paused a moment as he went out.

“I have only one remark to offer,” said he, “and it is this: I never heard such nonsense in the whole course of my life.”

(*To be continued.*)





## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### VI.

THE only person to whom Sir George was ever known to show the slightest civility was Mary March. At first it was perhaps on account of her evident shyness, her apparent poverty, the undeniable fact that she had to work for her living; but after a day or two he made the delightful discovery that she could play billiards uncommonly well. The only other good player was Mr. Baring, and his dislike to Sir George was so extreme that he never played if he could help it. Mary was therefore treasure-trove to the Baronet. She was Private Secretary to the old and far from sweet-tempered editor of one of the large London weekly reviews, and had thus acquired her billiard-playing capacity.

"He would not keep me if I could not play," she said. "He would get a male secretary who could. When I went to be engaged, he asked me if I could play. I had never touched a cue in my life, nor even seen a billiard-table; but I knew he was going to Scotland for six weeks, and would not want me till the end of that time, so I said 'Yes,' and went straight to a professional and learnt. I paid for the course out of my

first quarter's salary; it was well worth while."

The Radical Member was delighted.

"You are the kind that gets on," he said.

"I must get on," said Mary firmly. "You can always do a thing you must do. I have a special object in getting on."

"And what is that?"

"You will hear to-night. I am going to give the Relations my little romance. I have nothing else to tell them."

"Well," said Sir George, "nothing that we have heard so far has interested me at all, but I fancy your history may."

"My life has been a curious one," she said thoughtfully. "I look at Evelyn Baring, married almost before she was grown up, and shielded by her husband's love from every breath of discomfort, and I feel that that sort of life would not have suited me. What ability I have would never have been called into play. Loneliness and adversity have been good for me. I would not change my lot."

"You seem to me," he said, "as sensible a woman as ever I met."

And that evening he did nothing to annoy

anybody. He neither pared his nails, stared at Mrs. Hogben, nor see-sawed in his chair. The fact of his ceasing from troubling proved infinitely soothing to the Relations, and brought them to an excellent mood for listening to the story of

### Medina Villa.

"My mother, who was a Hobson," said Mary March, "died at my birth, and within two years of her death my father married again. My stepmother had many young children of her own, and I was sent away to a boarding-school at an early age. My father was anything but well off, and could not afford to keep me at school after I was seventeen. His aunt, Miss Trueman, a maiden lady living by herself, offered to adopt me, to which he gladly agreed; and, without my own consent having been asked or thought about, I was sent to live at Medina Villa.

"It was a queer kind of house, in an outlying northern suburb. It had been built by some enthusiast for rusticity when London was still seven miles distant, and when plaster battlements, French windows, and flimsy verandahs were in fashion.

"It stood now, with the forlorn look of worn-out, cast-off finery, in a by-road, from which a high brick wall separated it. The entrance was a door in the brick wall, and a long strip of neglected garden lay between it and the house. Behind was more garden, with mouldering stucco-statues and a disorganised fountain; beyond, a paddock in which a neighbouring tradesman grazed his horses. The houses opposite were newer, and stood much nearer to the road.

"It was November when I arrived, and the sodden garden-path along which I approached the house was streaked with leafless, unkempt tendrils of Virginian creeper. Miss Trueman herself admitted me, and I think she was glad to see how small and shy I was. I followed her into a shabby sitting-room, in which three cats occupied the three best chairs.

"She seemed anxious to be kind and friendly, but I did not feel drawn towards her. After we had drunk tea together and

she had shown me a small, comfortless bedroom, we sat down together with our work, and she informed me that she was very poor, and that now I was come she intended to dismiss her maid, and only employ a woman now and then, while I did all the housework in return for a home. She evidently thought that I should gratefully agree to this, but she soon found her mistake. I saw that there must be a definite understanding, and that at once.

"Well, Aunt Trueman," I said, 'it is best to speak plainly at the outset. If I am to take a housemaid's place, I shall expect a housemaid's wages. I am worth sixteen pounds, to begin with. But it is not my intention to be a housemaid at all. I have had a good education, and I have made the most of it. I speak French and German fluently, and am ready and willing to earn my own living. But there are still some things I want to learn before I feel that I am ready to go out into the world. Let us strike a bargain, you and I. I should like to stay with you for a year at least, and I will do so without wages, and give you what help I can, if you will pay for my instruction in book-keeping, typewriting, and shorthand.'

"She was very angry, and expressed herself forcibly. I ought to be grateful to anybody who would take me in; my own father could not afford to keep me.

"I don't want anybody to keep me; I want to keep myself,' was my answer. 'Your own proposal is a selfish one. Are you prepared, should you die, to leave me money enough for me to live upon in comfort?'

"Certainly not!' she cried, in furious anger. 'I live on an annuity, so you may at once and for all put out of your mind—'

"Just so,' said I. 'Then you have no right at all to ask me to serve you for nothing. What should I do when, ten or fifteen years hence, I am left penniless? Surely you see that I can't afford to work without wages! You think it over quietly, and to-morrow morning tell me what you decide upon. Remember, I would rather stay with you; and if you keep me on my conditions, I think you will find me a help.

But if you decide not to, I must advertise for something to do. I am young and able-bodied, and I won't be pauperised.'

"If one of the cats had formulated a declaration of independence, she could not have been more surprised. To earn one's own living was so ungenteel, she thought

she would do as I asked. I should attend afternoon classes in the subjects I wished to study, and she would pay. I was so overjoyed that I threw my arms round her neck and kissed her; and so my life at Medina Villa began.

"The classes I attended were at some



"I THOUGHT IT ONLY GOOD MANNERS ON THE PART OF THE UNKNOWN STRANGER WHEN HE OFFERED TO SEE ME HOME."

any woman would undergo any privation to escape it. Poor soul, she belonged to a different generation. To work in secret, ignominiously, unpaid, this, in her opinion, was the woman's portion. My bold words shook all her fundamental assumptions to their very roots. I say assumptions, because a woman like that has no opinions—only assumptions.

"However, next morning she told me

distance. I used to walk to them, and come back by tram. Every evening I used to catch the same tram, and every evening in a particular corner of it was always seated the same man. He got out when I did; we walked down Rowsell Road, he on one side, I on the other; when I went into my doorway, he disappeared into the opposite house, called 'Lebanon.' He took no sort of notice of me for some time—as you see

I am not a person to attract attention ; but the coincidence of our always travelling together and alighting together seemed at last to strike him, and he used to give me a friendly glance as my small, shabby self slipped into my accustomed place at the accustomed stage of the journey.

"One evening a very severe fog came on. It had been comparatively clear when I started ; it was dense as I returned. The tramcar crawled slowly along—the conductor with a lantern at the horses' heads ; and when we reached our stopping-place, I thought it only good manners on the part of the unknown passenger when he offered to see me home.

"I shall be all right if I can once get round the corner," I said. "In a straight road one cannot get lost."

"Don't you be too certain," he replied. "You might get lost between your garden gate and the front door to-night. Do you live with old Miss Trueman?"

"She is my father's aunt. I am living with her for a year. She cannot afford to keep me altogether."

"He laughed.

"Why, where's all the money going, then?"

"All the money!" I echoed.

"She's as rich as Croesus, they say," said he.

"She's as poor as Job," I retorted sharply, "and her annuity dies with her."

"I am sure you are wrong," he said. "Everybody round says she is a rich miser, and that the house is full of banknotes, packed away in despatch-boxes."

"There never was a greater mistake," I answered warmly ; "but I suppose if an eccentric old lady lives alone, people always get hold of some such idea."

"I daresay," he said ; "anyhow, it is common talk hereabouts. What do you do down in Clapton every day?"

"I told him that I was finishing my education ; and by this time we had reached Medina Villa, and it seemed as though I had led him right, not he me. He was surprised at my knowledge of where I was.

"You are a capable little thing," he remarked, "though you are so small and shy."

"Do you think you can cross the road alone?" I asked mischievously.

"I think so, though it looks black enough—as black as the future looks to me"; and he sighed heavily.

"Does the future look black to you?" I asked.

"I felt very sorry for him, and perhaps my sympathy was too much in my voice, for he looked down from his height above me with a laugh. We could barely see the outline of each other's heads.

"Run away indoors out of this horrible atmosphere," he said imperiously ; and before I could reply he had plunged away in the vapour.

"After a minute I heard his voice.

"All right!" he said.

"Good-night!" I cried back, and went in.

"It doesn't sound much of an episode, does it? But if you will believe me, it kept me awake all night. You see, it was the only episode I had. Long after I had gone to bed, as I lay huddled up in that icy room trying to think that I was warm, my fancy played with a fine glow about my unknown friend. . . . I invented names for him, and wove romances about his parentage. He was just a very ordinary man—a man you would never look at twice. He had nice eyes, but I was by no means sure that he himself was all that we mean by that comprehensive word.

"Life seemed to flow by like a dream until the following evening. When I entered my well-known tramcar, my friend looked up from his paper, saw me, smiled, made room for me beside him, and ostentatiously folded his special edition in a way that showed he meant to read no more. Then we talked, and did not part until we reached the doorway in the brick wall.

"On the third or fourth night after that we asked each other our names ; and I was conscious of childish delight when he told me he was called Cecil Alderson. He told me, furthermore, that he was employed in a large architect's office in the city, that he had lodgings at 'Lebanon,' that his parents were dead, and that his weak point was betting. He said he put every farthing he could get hold of on horses. I told him very candidly

what a fool I thought him, and how I should despise myself if I had such an idiotic taste. He seemed a good deal amused, but rather impressed too.

"'Fancy a weak little creature like you being stronger minded than I am!' he said, with humour.

"He was surprised to find out what big ambitions couched beneath the brim of my shabby old hat.

"By the time we had been a fortnight on speaking terms we seemed to know each other quite well. It was on the twelfth occasion of our reaching my door together that a man, walking past, hailed my companion with a familiar 'Hullo!' and, stopping short, said, with a nod towards me, 'Introduce me to your friend, won't you?'

"Cecil had started very visibly at sight of him.

"'Confound your impertinence!' he said fiercely. 'If you want to speak to me, wait till I am alone.'

"'Why shouldn't I ask to be presented to a lady?' said the stranger in an odious tone. 'Are you the only man hereabouts who can appreciate youth and beauty?'

"Cecil turned to me with a decided air.

"'Good-night, Miss March,' he said pointedly, unlatching the gate for me.

"I shook hands and went in; and I heard their angry voices as I went up the path. It was pitch dark at the time, so I had no idea what the man was like. Rowsell Road was not well lighted. But I had a shrewd suspicion that the man, when I first caught sight of him, had been cautiously emerging from the gate of Medina Villa.

"That was a Saturday night. On the Monday evening, when I got into the tramcar, Cecil Alderson was not there. It would seem to all of you quite ridiculous if I were to try to describe my misery, my blank disappointment. I invented a dozen reasons for his absence. Of these, illness seemed the most likely; he had looked so haggard and seemed so depressed the last few nights. Perhaps he was lying, lonely and in pain, in his lodging at 'Lebanon.' Well; I could do nothing. Who was I?

"I lived entirely upon hopes of the next night. The slow hours dragged. I had

worked myself up into a regular state of 'nerves' by evening. When again the car was empty, my anguish was redoubled. The third evening brought a third disappointment. He neither came nor sent any message to me. For a week this daily torture of hope daily deferred gripped me in its hateful clutches; only the lonely, the unloved, can guess what I suffered. Then Miss Trueman fell ill. The extreme cold and her stinginess in fires produced bronchitis; pneumonia supervened. I gave up everything to nurse her: sick-nursing is a thing I like. Mrs. Rowe, the charwoman who came daily to us, was a woman with her head on her shoulders, and she and I managed between us without calling in the trained nurse, who was the old lady's chief terror.

"I think that illness, the pressure of real anxiety, the necessity of immediate and constant exertion, probably saved me from falling into a morbid state of 'nerves,' on the removal of my one interest in life. When the crocuses were in bloom in our garden borders—which I now raked myself—I had grown accustomed to the fact of the empty tramcar, and could look back upon my episode as a thing of the past, and fling my undivided mind into the mysteries of shorthand.

"The weather grew more and more spring-like, and Miss Trueman's health improved. She and I had got on better since her illness, and I was now proficient enough in typewriting to be earning ten shillings a week in the office where I had been taught. I was able to buy myself a gown and a hat, much to her satisfaction, though I almost forfeited her good opinion by buying books as well.

"Still she continued much shaken by her severe illness, and in June she made up her mind to go and visit a widowed sister who lived in the north of England. I thought it a good plan. I like solitude; and though we rubbed along together well enough, we were in no sense congenial companions. But I drew the line at sleeping alone in the house. On that point I was inflexible. Mrs. Rowe must bear me company, or I would not stay.



"OVER ME STOOD A MAN, . . . A MASK OVER HIS FACE."

"'But it's a pack of nonsense!' cried my aunt. 'Who'd break in here? There's nothing to steal. We poor folks are safe from burglars, and our bolts and bars are strong.'

"'Nevertheless,' was my decision, 'I will not stay in the house alone.'

"I did not tell her that it was rumoured in the neighbourhood that she was rich, for two reasons. In the first place it would have made her nervous, in the second she would have asked where I heard it.

"Mrs. Rowe demurred a good deal at first to the idea of 'sleeping in.' She had her husband's breakfast to get, she said. But by my persuasion this difficulty was adjusted, and I saw my aunt off to the north with a feeling of relief that I could scarcely conceal. I really enjoyed life during the next week—spending long, lazy days in the garden, in a deck-chair, revelling in

my holiday in a way which only those who work hard will understand.

"My aunt had been gone ten days when Mrs. Rowe received an urgent message from home that one of her daughters had been brought home ill, and in great anxiety she set off, with many promises to get back before night, and I was left alone. This I did not mind at all until, after I had cleared away my supper, dusk began to fall.

"The weather was changing: the air was hot and thundery, the sky lowering. There was no moon, and when night fell it was with a pitchy blackness unusual at midsummer.

"I sat by the dining-room window in front

of the house watching and waiting for Mrs. Rowe, who came not. The mutterings of the distant storm sounded ominous. I never spent a longer hour than that between ten and eleven. The woman well knew that it was my aunt's practice to shut up all at ten; as she was still absent at eleven, I felt sure that she would not come that night.

"I went down the garden path, locked the gate, and returned to the lonely dark house, splashed as I ran by great rain-drops as big as pennies. Carefully I fastened all bolts and shutters, collected the cats, and took the meagre plate-basket to my room, prepared to make the best of the situation.

"I wished that it had not been such a weird night; the air was full of strange sounds; fitful gusts of wind shook the house unexpectedly, and died away into mutterings,



as though voices were speaking outside my room door. I decided to burn a candle all night; but it was long before I sank into my usual deep and dreamless sleep.

"A hand on my shoulder awakened me in a flash. I looked up. Over me stood a man, plainly visible in the light of the candle. He wore a mask over his face. For a moment I thought that it was nightmare; then, as I struggled into a sitting position, it dawned upon me that it was fact. I turned my terror-stricken gaze upon a second man, who, as I sat up, had uttered some kind of ejaculation, and, seeing flight perhaps in my eye, had darted back towards the door. I was actually alone in that house with two masked burglars. I might shriek and scream—nobody could hear me. Things flashed through my mind with awful rapidity. They hoped to find treasure—they would find nothing—would they not revenge themselves on me?

"In that moment I knew the worst kind of terror, for I feared worse than death; but I sat up in bed, shook off the man's hand, and asked, in a clear, cold voice:

"What do you want? Who are you?"

"That's right," said the man by my bed; "you're the right sort, you are. You keep quiet and we shan't do you any harm; we wouldn't have disturbed you, only that we want a little information out of you. Who we are is our affair; but what we are after is your aunt's money."

"I am wholly at your mercy," I answered, "so I suppose I must give you what you want; but I am afraid it will hardly pay you for your trouble."

"You hand it over, and leave that to us," he replied with a laugh.

"Go outside into the passage, then, and I will get up," I replied. "Go at once, you cowardly brute!"

"No hard words, miss," he replied. "My mate here is a real gentleman, and when we come across a lady as reasonable as what you are, our manners are excellent."

"His companion dragged him out of the room as he was speaking, and there seemed to me to be some altercation going on between them as I hastily slipped on my

shoes and stockings, put on my dress, and called them in.

"Here," I said, "is the 'swag,' as I think you call it, and much good may it do you. Six of those spoons are silver; the rest is all plated. Here are two pounds in gold, the contents of the housekeeping purse; seven shillings of my own; and a silver watch. If you want more, you must take away the tables and chairs."

"He cast a contemptuous glance at the display, and then he turned and looked fixedly at me. There was a snarl in his voice now.

"D'you take us for a pair of silly fools?" he asked with a grim laugh. "A girl like you oughtn't to think she can get off with a silly dodge like that. If that's all, you might as well have stopped in bed, and lent us your handkerchief to take the stuff away in. Come, show us where the old girl keeps it."

"Keeps what?"

"Look here," he menaced with his fist, "we're treating you like a lady, but we shan't stand any more of this kid. Time's precious. Lead on, and show us where she keeps it all."

"I looked steadily at him.

"On my honour," I said, "I don't know what you are talking about. My aunt is a poor woman, living on a small annuity. I tell you there is nothing of value in the house."

"Except you," he said, with a hateful sneer. "If we can't find anything else, we'll take that."

"The other man was still in the background, and impressed me with the idea that he was nervous and wished to be away. He shuffled his feet and coughed. I controlled my trembling and managed to control my voice also, as I said:

"Shall I show you my aunt's room?"

"That all depends. Does she keep it there?"

"What do you refer to? Explain yourself!" I cried with anger. "Does she keep what there?"

"Come," he said, in another tone, "we know that Miss Trueman has between forty and fifty thousand pounds in the house, so what is the use of denying it?"

"Your information is so much better than mine; what is the use of wasting time over me?" I cried. "If you know it is here, you should also know where to look for it."

"It's no good your trying to gain time by fencing like this," he said, with every sign in his voice of increasing rage. "Mrs. Rowe won't come back till we give her leave, and we shan't go till we've got the money; and it will be the worse for you if you don't help us."

"You had better search the whole house," I replied. "Begin with her room."

"I led them to my aunt's room, and they set to work. They emptied every drawer and shelf with a feverish haste which belied their confident boasting. They pulled up the carpet, ripped up the mattress. I felt so certain that nothing could be found that I took little interest in their proceedings. Of the two I feared the silent one more; he two or three times seemed to be edging in my direction when his companion's back was turned. Suddenly the one who had all the time been spokesman flung the ripped-up bedding across the room with a howl of rage, and turned upon me."

"Enough of this folly!" he cried; "we shall be all night in a house this size. Tell us where it is, or I'll make you, do you hear?" So saying, he seized my arm and twisted it viciously. The pain was great, but I would not cry out. He pulled a revolver from his pocket, and held it to my temples. "Now," he said, "if you don't speak before I count twenty, I fire."

"Why," said I, "I will

say anything you please under compulsion. Do you want me to name a place? Well, then, it's in the garret."

"That's a lie."

"It may be or it may not, I don't know. You are only wasting time. I can easily lie to save my life, but I can't tell you what I don't know."

"His companion drew him aside and said something in a whisper. He growled."

"I tell you she does know," he said, "and she must be made to speak." He turned upon me with an abatement of his



"THE WRETCH . . . HURLED ME DOWN THE STEPS."

wrath, but a new menace in his voice. 'We know the money is here; we are assured that you know where it is,' he said. 'We see your dodge clearly, and for a young girl like you it's a clever one. You think to keep us hunting about in the wrong place until day dawns and we have to bolt or you get a chance to make somebody hear. But that won't do. We're bound to get off now through our confounded weakmindedness in treating you as we have. You don't believe that we shall hurt you; well, I'm sorry, but you've got to be taught different.'

"He suddenly whipped out a thin cord from his pocket, and caught me by the wrists. The other man sprang forward with an exclamation as of anger.

"'Will you see a woman ill-treated?' I cried

"'Stand off!' furiously said the man who was tying my hands. 'I shan't stick at much now, I can tell you, and I'll shoot you as well if you interfere here. We'll make her find her tongue; I've had just about enough of her cheek.'

"He had tied the cord with savage tightness. The other man seemed to waver. I could see that he could not tell what he had better do; perhaps he thought it safer not to further exasperate his companion.

"'Now,' said the brute, 'if you want those knots undone, lead us right.'

"The pain forced tears to my eyes, but I would not cry.

"'Try the cellar,' I said.

"'Ha!' he replied, 'finding your tongue, ain't you? If we draw the cellar blank, it'll be another knot, remember.'

"'I've no reason to say the cellar except to say something,' I said. 'There is a cellar, and if there is money it might be there.'

"We filed down to the cellar, a dismal procession, and they flashed their lights around. As soon as the radiance lit up the cobwebby walls I felt sure that, if there was a secret, I had in my ignorance betrayed it. I had known Miss Trueman to visit this cellar; she had never allowed me down there. In one corner was a bottle-rack, piled high with obviously empty

bottles. When this was removed, it could be clearly seen that there was no mortar between certain of the bricks behind. These bricks came out quite easily, and behind there actually were two black japanned boxes. They were strong, with Yale locks, and the thieves did not wait to open them; the early summer dawn was hard upon their heels. Up to the moment of discovery the man who had tied my hands had been at pains to stand between me and his mate, as though he thought that weak-minded person might untie me if he got the chance; but the moment the despatch-boxes were in his hands he made for the cellar steps in a way that suggested that he meant to make off with the booty alone. The other man darted up after him; I followed slowly, encumbered by my gown and my bound hands.

"At the trap-door the silent burglar turned, held the light down to me, and stretched a hand to pull me up. The other pushed him away.

"'Hold these,' he said, thrusting the boxes into his hands. 'I'll untie her knots.'

"Preserving my balance with difficulty, I held up my hands, and the wretch, suddenly pushing with all his force, hurled me down the steps.

"'That for endangering our lives with your lies!' he cried with malice as he looked down; 'it'll be some time before they look for you down there!'

"As he spoke his arm flashed out; there was a sharp report, a puff of smoke, something stung me in the shoulder, and I lost consciousness. The open flap of the cellar door had concealed exactly what was passing from the other man; but as I swooned away I had a curious delusion that I heard the voice of Cecil Alderson crying out, 'You treacherous hound!' and the noise of a scuffle and report of firearms.

"I became aware, by degrees, of extreme discomfort and jolting, of a pain like a hot wire through one shoulder.

"'Oh! stop, please; let me lie still,' I moaned to the unseen person who was hauling me about.

"'Are you conscious?' said a husky

voice in my ear. 'Thank God for that! Try and bear it a minute longer, and then I can lay you down.'

"'Cecil!' I breathed, wondering if I were dead. Of course, I had never called him that before.

"'Yes,' he replied. 'Plucky little woman! We shall be through the trap-door in a minute, and then I can easily carry you upstairs.'

"'All right,' I managed to articulate, 'so long as I know it's you.'

"He gave a kind of groan, and then addressed himself to the task of wriggling himself and me somehow through the hole into the hall passage—a difficult task enough, but a trifle easier when I was not a dead weight.

"The grey dawn light glimmered coldly, the thunder still muttered, the rain fell in cataracts, roaring on the verandah. I saw Cecil's face then, stern and old, with his hair cut curiously close. He did not say anything at all, but took me up bodily, and carried me upstairs to my own room, where he laid me on the bed.

"I was in great pain, and my tongue felt rough and leathery in my mouth; but I held out my swollen hand, trying to smile at him.

"He hardly seemed to notice, and hurried out of the room without a word. In a minute he was back with a boiling kettle in his hand. He must have found and lit the gas-plate in the kitchen as I lay unconscious on the cellar floor. In a clumsy and yet a capable way he set to work to sponge away the blood from my cheek and forehead, where I had fallen with violence. He found a clean handkerchief to tie round my head, and then with strips of a towel he improvised a bandage for my shoulder. All the time he said no word, and I lay content, and perhaps not fully conscious.

"Presently he brought me a glass of water and held me up, so that I could drink. No words can express the relief of that draught; I felt as though I never had known thirst before.

"'You know me?' he murmured, bending over me; 'you understand what I say?'

"'Oh, yes! . . . Where have you been all this time?'

"'In gaol,' he said shortly.

"'In gaol!' I echoed. 'Oh, why didn't you tell me, so that I could have helped you.'

"'I thought you would be sure to see it in the papers,' he said shortly. 'But you mustn't talk. I have tied up your shoulder as best I could. Are you afraid to be left alone while I go for a doctor?'

"'The terror in my eyes answered him.

"'All right,' he said, 'I'll go and send somebody else.'

"'There's nobody else. Don't go!' I gasped.

"'But you don't understand. You've been shot,' he said. 'You must have a doctor at once.'

"'I think I'd rather die, if you don't mind,' I said faintly.

"'But I do mind,' he said in a wild sort of way, some strong emotion breaking through the stony calmness he was trying to assume. 'It's the only thing on earth I do mind except getting hold of that scoundrel Clay. Look here, little woman, let me leave you for just five minutes. Trust me, though I have been in gaol, though I did break in here like a thief. Trust me.'

"'Yes, I do trust you. I'll try to get better if you wish it.'

"He took up my hands, kissed my bruised, swollen wrists; then hurriedly went out and closed the door after him.

"I lay, half drowsy, not conscious of much pain, thinking chiefly of the surprise of seeing him again. Very soon I heard steps ascending the stairs, slow and cautious. Someone apparently looked into two or three rooms of the landing, then approached mine; the door opened, and a big policeman, helmet in hand, peeped in!

"'Don't you disturb yourself, miss; doctor'll be here directly,' he said apologetically. 'I'm afraid you've been treated very bad.'

"'It's all right,' I said indistinctly; 'only I've hurt my head.'

"Professional curiosity overcame his pity for my plight. He whipped out a pocket-book.

"'Could you give me any idea, now, miss, of the value of the property removed?'

"‘I know nothing about it—nothing—nothing!’ I said wearily. ‘Why don’t you go and catch the thief?’

"‘There’s half a dozen after him already, miss. He hasn’t much of a chance, I don’t think. Perhaps you could just oblige me with Miss Trueman’s present address?’

"And this I gave him as my last remnant of consciousness faded.

"When next I realised anything, a specimen of my aunt’s pet horror, the trained nurse, was installed in my room and I was making satisfactory progress towards recovery, my constitutional vigour having steered me clear, by a hand’s breadth, of brain fever.

"It was only by very slow degrees that I came to know exactly the circumstances attending that burglary, which made the name of Medina Villa well known for a while to all readers of the daily papers.

"The man called Clay, the prime mover in it, had formerly held a post as clerk in the office of the firm of stockbrokers who managed Miss Trueman’s property. He thus knew the

unsuspected extent of it. Discharged by his employers under grave suspicion of dishonesty, he had not been able to get another post, and, going from bad to worse, had set his undoubted cleverness to work as a housebreaker. His attempts were attended

with success, and for a time he worked alone and kept his secret so well that none of his acquaintance had any idea what he did for a living.

"He had for some years had a slight acquaintance with Cecil Alderson, upon whom, at the time of his disappearance from the tramcar, a heavy trouble had fallen.

"A small sum had been stolen by one of the clerks in the office where Cecil worked. Various circumstances combined to throw suspicion on him; and when it was shown that he had been in difficulties through betting, and had paid off his debts to very nearly the amount of the missing sum within a few days of the theft, the evidence was considered strong enough to send him to gaol.

"In view of the good character given him by his employers, the comparative smallness of the sum, and the fact that the firm was inclined to be lenient, his sentence was a light one. It would have been lighter still if he would have pleaded guilty, but this he would not do. He was in-

nocent, and he refused to say that he was not.

"The innocent man emerged from his unjust imprisonment embittered, branded, miserable. In that condition he met with Clay, who was on the look-out for a partner



"HE CARRIED ME UPSTAIRS TO MY OWN ROOM."

he could trust, having now the desire to attempt bigger work than could be done single handed. Cecil, who of course had no idea what profession he followed, thought it good-natured of him to give dinners to and be seen in public places with one who had just 'done time.' In his reckless, half-despairing state he turned to the one man who befriended him. In that condition he was tempted by Clay. 'We are both,' said the scoundrel, in effect, 'suffering undeserved misfortune because Society is such a fool as to think us dishonest; let us be revenged upon Society, then.' The fallacy of such reasoning is obvious to us who have never known what it is to be outlawed; but it appealed to poor Cecil then. I do not think he seriously contemplated going into burglary as a profession; but a fortune of forty or fifty thousand pounds was worth an adventure. Clay undertook all details, such as bribing the woman servant to be out of the house; and one girl they concluded would be as wax in their hands. Cecil stipulated that the girl should not be hurt, and in his despairing, reckless mood, threw himself into the venture.

"He did not, of course, for a moment suppose that the house they were to break into was the one in which I lived. He had severed all connection with Rowsell Road at the time of his disgrace. He had no reason to suppose that Clay knew anything of the neighbourhood; except for the night when he and I met him in the road, he had never seen him there.

"The affair was arranged in Clay's rooms, somewhere in the neighbourhood of the Waterloo Road; and as they took train by a line of rail which brought them into another suburb, and worked across country to approach the house from the paddock behind, and as Cecil, moreover, knew nothing of the outward aspect of Medina Villa, never having been inside the garden gate, it was not until they were actually in my room that he realised what he had done.

"Still, he relied on Clay's promise that I should not be hurt; and it was probably my own impertinence that was to blame for the man's brutality. He believed that I had all

along known the money to be in the cellar, but had denied it to gain time. Poor Clay! I cannot help pitying him! I picture his emotions when he opened those despatch-boxes! One contained my aunt's latest will, bequeathing all her fortune to me; the other, a collection of old-fashioned trinkets, worth at the most twenty or thirty pounds. The third box, which really did contain a large portion of her fortune in banknotes, she had taken with her to the National Safe Deposit, and left there before starting on her visit to the north.

"I believe that my evidence was of real value in shortening Cecil's sentence. His behaviour had been something so unheard-of in the annals of burglary. To get me medical help at the earliest possible moment he had given himself up to the police, when he could most certainly have got clear away had he chosen. He had bandaged my hurts, carried me upstairs, most likely saved my life by his prompt, generous action. But the best thing of all was, that his old firm had meanwhile discovered that his late imprisonment had been a miscarriage of justice; and they made this known, so that he excited the real sympathy and pity of the public.

"But when my aunt found that I meant to devote to a convict the life saved by that convict, then there was trouble, as no doubt there will be among you all to-night.

"When Cecil comes out next spring, I am going to marry him immediately, and we shall start for Africa together, to seek our fortunes in a place where his bad record will not hamper him. My aunt will neither give nor bequeath to me one penny of her fortune; but I have already saved our passage-money and something over, and the cheque that Cousin Hobson sent me will swell our little fund for a fresh start.

"The knowledge that I am waiting for him has given him hope and courage. The time goes fast, and the necessity for hard work cheers me on. There is a joy in adding shilling to shilling, in getting up early and going to bed late, if you are working for the man you love; and, in short, as I said to Sir George this morning, I would not change my lot."





## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### VII.

IT was on the morning after Miss March's story that Agatha Mayne found the Hosier's Wife in tears all by herself in the library, and upon inquiry elicited the fact that it was the Radical Member who was the cause of her trouble.

"I found him alone in here," said the poor lady, "and thought it only good manners to try and pass a remark, though I must say he has never taken the trouble to be civil to me. So I just observed that the story with which Mrs. Locke had entertained the ladies and gentlemen a few evenings back was a very remarkable one. He growled out something about more remarkable for imagination than veracity, and then asked me this extraordinary question :

"What did I mean by ladies and gentlemen?"

"I replied that the term was usually applied to those who had been brought up in genteel and select circles, or in a religious connexion.

"Ho!" says he, 'a religious connexion indeed! What have you ever done for your

fellow-creatures? That's the test of a lady or a gentleman.'

"I made him the answer that in our circuit the poor were exceedingly well looked after, and I thought that was the case in all religious bodies. And then," said Mrs. Hogben, applying her handkerchief to her eyes, "he rounded on me somethink crool.

"An' it's you,' says he, 'an' those like you,' says he, 'that do more evil in the world than all the criminals in the gaols put together—doling out a pittance to them as has as good a right to what's yours as what you have, and better, for money got in trade is mostly unfairly come by.' Those was his words. 'Call this set ladies and gentlemen!' he says; 'I've never chanced on a worse set of snobs and toadies! There's not one of them would dare to tell Titherleigh Hobson what they thought of him.'

"And how can you know what to think of him when you've never seen him yet?" cries I, I was that vexed at his impertinence! 'I should think he's a deal better than you, anyway, for he writes to me like a equal,'

I says ; 'and so do all the company speak to me as a equal, all but yourself—the socialist,' I says.

" 'Why, that's because they are all afraid of offending him,' cries he. 'If they didn't expect the old boy to leave them money, do you suppose there's one of that lot would speak to you ?'

" 'That they would if they knew I was a relation,' I gives him back.

"He gives a horrid laugh, and 'Look here,' he says, 'I mean you well. Here's a hint for you. Don't you let them persuade you into telling a story,' says he, 'for there they'll sit, that Minor Poet and the lot, laughing in their sleeves at your English,' he says. 'Don't you go and make yourself ridiculous, my poor old soul,' he says.

"I felt that vicious I could have scratched him ! I didn't mean to enter into the story-telling as it happens, knowing full well that my ways are not altogether your ways, though kindness itself. But to be so spoke to in my own cousin's house !"

Her sobs were renewed.

Agatha sat down beside her.

"Dear Mrs. Hogben, don't let the words of such a man distress you for a moment," said she, taking the fat, kind hand in hers. "He talks a great deal of nonsense, but if I am not much mistaken, he will calm down greatly when Cousin Titherleigh appears on the scene. I, for one, won't hear of your missing your turn at story-telling. Why, surely it is your turn to amuse us to-night !"

The good lady's tears still trickled.

"I do know such a wonderful story, too," she lamented. "I don't know as it's true, but it was very widely believed in the part I come from. But I couldn't put it into suitable language."

Agatha began to protest eagerly ; and presently Mrs. Locke and Evelyn Baring came into the room, and added their entreaties. But with the sterling good sense of the English middle-class, Mrs. Hogben knew her own limitations, and it seemed as though they would have to go without the story, which was a great pity, as in that case the stock would run out before

the date when Cousin Titherleigh was expected.

Suddenly Agatha had an inspiration. A thick, cold drizzle had succeeded frost, and it was impossible to go out. Why should not Mrs. Hogben dictate her story to her, and then she would write it down in words at which Sir George Halkett could not sneer, and get Mr. Rivers to read it out for her to the assembled company ? The suggestion delighted the Hosier's Wife ; and it was agreed that, as the story could hardly be ready for publication that evening, they should ask Mr. Rivers to change turns with the lady.

Stainley had, by this time, reached the stage when he would have done anything that Agatha chose to demand of him. He had been constituted a kind of chairman of the entertainment committee, so it was easy for him to make this trifling alteration.

Therefore that evening, when they took their accustomed seats around a fireside which was beginning to feel home-like, he spoke as follows :

"Ladies and gentlemen, Mrs. Hogben, whose turn falls this evening, wishes me to make a change in the order of our story-telling. She asks me to be the narrator this evening, in order that her own contribution to your enjoyment may be the more carefully prepared. In short, she is having it written down, and we hope for the pleasure of hearing it to-morrow, either from her own lips or from mine, if she will condescend to appoint me her mouthpiece.

"In view of the turn which our evenings have taken—the personal turn, I mean—I am not going to offer you at this time any of the many good stories which I have heard, but simply to relate an experience of my own which had for me a quality of creepiness which I can hardly hope to reproduce in the minds of my hearers. I shall, then, with the permission of Mrs. Hogben, begin."

So saying, he made the Hosier's Wife a courtly bow, which she received with an eye of triumph fixed on Sir George, who was trimming his nails with an irritating smile, and began—

## A Twilight Experience.

"LET me not slur over any of my weaknesses! Needs must I then begin with an admission that I do worse than write bad verses—I paint bad pictures.

"One cannot tell why. I am without the motive that inspired Dante on the historic occasion when he began to paint an angel. It is a mere superfluity of naughtiness, for which no excuse can be found, and for which indulgence must be humbly craved.

"There lies a district in the extreme west of Dorsetshire, near the coast, which appeals to my inmost being in a way I can only account for by supposing that it must have been the scene of a remote previous incarnation. It is beautiful, of course. The hills are wild, the combes deep, the poor soil only lavish of pine, larch, heather, and golden broom; but other places as beautiful make not the same appeal.

"This is a land desolate and forsaken, of dwindling villages, ruined cottages, vast tracts of solitude, and hints of bygone races in cairn and castrum.

"There is one particular spot which, when you reach it, at the summit of a sheer sharp climb, emerging from the dense shadow of a pine-hanger, gives the effect of a vast natural amphitheatre. Before you lies a circular basin of broken moorland; the opposite rim makes your horizon, lifting jagged edges like

crenulations against the dead eastern evening sky.

"Rabbits and juniper, whortleberry and bramble, patches of heather, some bare sandy scars where the loose land has slipped a little—this is all; yet the effect is tremendous.

"It was sunset when I first reached it. Mrs. Vyell, the wife of the squire who owned the old red house in the fertile neighbouring combe, had given me the hint to seek it out.

"A spot more separate, more completely



"UP HE WENT, SLOWLY, BUT STEADILY."

isolated from all life, one could not conjure up in thought. Sketching-material was with me; the place was absolutely unsketchable. But it held me with a powerful, compelling hand, the solitude reaching out mighty arms to clutch me. I sat down and drank in the impression of desolation, paint-box and palette idle beside me.

"Wild, sterile land! There was not even pasture for sheep. How few feet, since the dawn of history, must have trod its inhospitable acres! No trace of farming, no shed, no barn, not even a gate, wherever I turned my eyes.

"The sun went down as I sat lost in musings. I knew the moon would soon be up, and that she would rise in the east, right before me. It became a necessity to wait, gazing into the purple August twilight until the disc of yellowed silver should emerge, a radiant surprise, from behind the rim of my amphitheatre, to hang lamenting above the silence and emptiness.

"Just where would she appear? Behind that bit of crumbled wall? Behind the beech-clump next to it? Over the castellated edge of rabbit-levelled turf? I must wait and see. No human being could or would intrude. It led no whither, this wild cup in the heart of the hills. Loneliness had immemorially claimed it wholly; it belonged 'to darkness and to me' in the uttermost sense of those magic words.

"And even as the thought was framed, I became aware of some movement in the depth of the hollow beneath me, down far below, where winter torrents had washed and broken the ground into fantastic shapes, finding only partial outlet, and in summer settling down to be soft emerald morass.

"Something, someone, flitted behind a big bramble-bush, then emerged, and moved upwards, away from me, but nearer to the level of my line of vision. It was a man, carrying a bundle over his shoulder—a shepherd, as I guessed, slowly and with toil ascending the eastern slope of the amphitheatre, exactly opposite my point of view.

"I wondered whence he came and whither he went; and as the moon tarried and nothing else diverted my eye, I watched him

with careful eagerness in the fading light, and it seemed that as he moved, a very narrow track which he was following became perceptible on the rugged slopes. Up he went, slowly but steadily, never glancing behind, making evidently for a given point; and now that the pink flush had wholly died away from the hillside, it suddenly became apparent that what had seemed only a bit of broken wall on the horizon line, was in fact a solitary dwelling—a cottage with a thatched roof. So soon had my fantastic conception of utter loneliness received its contradiction!

"That cottage was doubtless the wayfarer's bourne. Here, careless of the awful dead weight of isolation, unmoved by the power of the spirit of the hills, he dwelt, and brought up children, and rested, all unconscious of the awful forces of nature, and faced without flinching the terrors which were real to his forefathers, simply because he did not understand them.

"In a few minutes he would reach his home, and in a few minutes more a light would appear in that remote window, which I saw now only as a small square of shadow.

"Yes, I was right. He had reached the cottage; he had paused, or hesitated,—he was too far off for me to divine why,—and now he had gone in at the door.

"But all was still dark within. More and more densely the shadow of night fell upon the hills; the brooding peace was broken only by the wheeling flight of a white owl around my head. Ah, there at last! A bright gleam was shining through the window-square. It grew larger as I gazed; the aperture was very gradually filling with light—a dazzling, pure, white light.

"Something like a shock overcame me as I suddenly realised the truth. It was the moon I saw—the moon, which had stolen up behind the hill, and now showed me the weird fact that the cottage was a ruin, a hollow shell. Its broken lineaments were now plainly visible against the radiance behind.

"What did the shepherd seek there at this hour?

"An unaccountable tremor seized me—a desire for human society and a warm hearth; the spirits of the hills were too strong for

me. The shepherd might have no nerves, but I was the child of my age, and I promptly packed up my things and went home through the murky recesses of the pine-hanger, and then by way of lanes which human feet had lately trodden, and where one saw occasionally behind drawn curtains the twinkle of a light more homely, if less brilliant, than that of the queenly moon.

"But next evening the influences of the place drew me there again at sunset; and again at the same hour I saw the same man taking the same course up the hillside to the cottage. It was, of course, later that evening before the moon came up; but though I waited till then, I did not see the man come out.

"I was consumed with a vast curiosity—a curiosity to know what he did there alone without a light in the ruin. I laughed at my own folly, too. He kept his tools there; he was storing peat, or bringing up a lamb by hand. But none of these obvious reasons satisfied me. Deep down in my heart blossomed the hope that he might turn out to be a recluse, a real lover of solitude, a person capable of sympathising with me.

"I formed a plan to intercept him. The next night I would come early, walk round to the ruined cottage, confront him on his arrival, and have a talk—perhaps become the recipient of some quaint bit of history or folklore. The idea so formed was quickly carried out. The spell of glorious weather waxed with the waxing moon; nothing on the following day intervened to prevent my solitary evening ramble.

"The cottage was a long way off; it took a surprisingly long time to reach it. Perched on the brow of the hill, it overlooked another combe as desolate as this one, and also commanded a view of the sea.

"It had evidently been a dwelling-house; in a square walled-in garden-patch were still traces of cultivation. It was built of solid stone, but the decay of the roof had left it at the mercy of the wild weather, and it was sadly fallen to ruin. There were four rooms—two upstairs, two down. One walked straight into the kitchen, with its wide fireplace and mouldering remnant of dresser-shelves, and ladder-like stair

communicating with rooms above. From the kitchen a communicating doorway opened into an inner parlour.

"Among the scattered ashes on the hearth bloomed a yellow sea-poppy; no fire, then, had been recently kindled there. The soft summer breeze blew lightly through the hollow shell, and swayed a jagged end of rope that dangled in the doorway between kitchen and parlour.

"I tried the narrow stair. It creaked and groaned, but it was of Dorset oak and it bore my weight. Above were two bedrooms, empty and half unroofed. Nothing to be seen or found there. A search around the back of the premises revealed no more; there were no stores, no wood-pile, no sign of human industry, no apparent reason of any kind why a man should visit the place.

"Piqued curiosity began to stimulate imagination, and sought to invent a motive for lonely twilight seeking of such a spot. It might be a tryst; there might be a second party, as yet unseen, who came over the brow of the hill to meet her lover as he ascended from the valley. Or it might be a place to hide treasure—though I could find no indication of a cellar. As gloaming fell, romance awoke, and various possibilities suggested themselves. It seemed very long before I saw the figure of my friend, as I secretly called him, working his way up the hillside, his bundle as usual on his shoulder.

"I had taken up my station in the little square bit of garden-ground in front of the cottage. The gate had entirely disappeared, the gateway through which the approaching figure must enter was about three yards to my left. I sat on the low stone wall, and watched him come.

"It was not dark. I could see him plainly; it followed, therefore, that he could see me also. But even when he drew near enough for his features to be recognisable, he took no notice.

"Pausing, he fumbled at the yawning gateway in the place where no latch was. Such light as remained was behind him, so his face was not distinctly visible. It was dark and bearded. He seemed a powerful man in the prime of life.

"His indifference was curiously annoying, I had been awaiting his appearance so long and so anxiously.

" 'Good-evening, friend,' I said heartily.

"He neither started nor turned; he simply took no notice whatever.

"A queer feeling of chill crept over me. He had passed by in such a notable silence;

"There was no method of getting out at the back; he could hardly leave the place without my seeing him. My pipe, lit with my last match, was mercifully not out. I sat down to wait. No sound came from the darkness inside. It might have been hard to say which was the more completely silent, he within or I without.



"A QUEER FEELING OF CHILL CREPT OVER ME."

his feet upon the weed-grown shingle pathway made no sound; he had slipped into the gloom of the interior like a shadow.

"Again the curious agitation of the nerves which had possessed me when first I saw the moonlight glint through the ruin!

"I had no matches with me, and I confess, to the detriment of my reputation for courage, that, until the moon rose, I simply dared not enter the cottage.

"Slowly, slowly the showering radiance of the moonlight stole over the dusky wall. Her coming illuminated all things, sharp, well-edged, splendidly massed into lights and darks. I delayed no longer, but stepped up the pathway and looked into the cottage.

"All was still. In the kitchen there was not much light, for there was no window in the opposite wall; but to the right, beyond the doorway that led into the parlour, a vivid



moonbeam streamed across the floor, throwing into clear relief some object that swung from the jagged rope's end—something drooping, limp, inhuman, with a head that lolled horribly to one side.

"I faced it for several appreciable seconds. I heard my own heart-beats as there gradually awoke a tingling repulsion, a rush of shame at my callous, cowardly waiting outside while inside this man had unhindered inflicted upon himself the death which apparently he had contemplated for the past two nights, without the courage to accomplish it. It was not cowardice, but an instinct stronger

than I,—it may have been reverence,—that caused me to cover my eyes a moment before snatching out my knife and advancing.

"In that moment the delusion had vanished : no dark form hung in the void space where still the jagged rope's end swung to and fro on the idle breeze. I saw the empty oblong of the doorway, like a dark picture-frame, filled with moonlight. Some madness had seized my senses ; there was nothing there.

"I made no further investigations, but just turned on my heel and hurried away—not to say bolted—over the hillside, plunging through the thick trees, down to where



"A VIVID MOONBEAM STREAMED ACROSS THE FLOOR, THROWING INTO CLEAR RELIEF SOME OBJECT THAT SWUNG FROM THE JAGGED ROPE'S END."

nestled the old red manor-house of Barton Fitzroy.

"It was late for a call, but the squire and Mrs. Vyell were kind enough to overlook the irregularity. It was explained that night had overtaken me rambling on the hillside ; and when a glass of Madeira and a good cigar had tranquillised the nerves which, it must be owned, were somewhat jarred, and I felt pretty sure of being able to control the vocal chords, I said lightly :

"What a curiously solitary place is that little circular combe of which you told me !"

"Ah, you have been there !"

"Pretty Mrs. Vyell was interested.

"‘More than once,’ I confessed, with eyes fixed upon my cigar.

"‘Did you happen to notice a ruined cottage on the brow of the hill?’

"‘Yes, I thought it the most lonely human habitation I have met with in England.’

"‘It has never been inhabited since I remember,’ she said softly, gazing into the fire. ‘About thirty years ago there was a tragedy there.’

"‘Will you tell me about it?’

"‘Francis knows more about it than I do,’ she said, with a glance at her husband. ‘He’s a native of these parts, you see. Tell it, Francis. Mr. Rivers won’t accuse a man of exaggeration; women have all the credit of a lively imagination.’

"‘The squire looked reminiscent for a few moments.

"‘There was a man in this village,’ he suddenly began, ‘when I was quite a youngster, named Israels. He was a miller’s son, and they had Portuguese blood in them. Young Israels was a big, handsome fellow, but moody and restless, with the fever of the sea adventurer in his veins. He would have nothing to do with the mill, but was always a rover. When he was about thirty years old, he came home from a voyage, wooed Kitty Eusden, our local belle, and married her, under the very nose of Larking, a good, respectable fellow, to whom she was betrothed.

"‘Israels’ marriage developed in him a new trait—a jealousy that was almost mania; he may have had more reasons for it than we knew of, but the fact is certain that the men of the village hardly dared pass the time of day with his wife, for fear of getting their teeth knocked down their throats.

"‘When they had been two or three years wed, the yearning to wander came upon him again. He was torn between the ever-growing restlessness and his fear of leaving his wife behind. So he set to work to build that cottage—far from the village—far from everything that might have helped her to bear her solitude; settled her in it, with provision of all he could think of for her comfort, and was off, leaving her, though this he did not know, within six months of becoming a mother for the first time.

"‘She was fond of him, and she was not a bad girl, not by any means, though shallow. Her conduct at first was exemplary, and had the baby lived I believe all might have gone well. But the baby died, and there came on the top of this desolation a period when she heard not a word from her absent husband. Her loneliness must have been hard to bear, and poor Larking used to go and see her.

"‘The place was so remote that nobody knew what was going on, until, when Israels had been two years absent, they went away together. A week after their departure the wanderer returned.

"‘He went up to the cottage, found it forsaken, and came down to the vicarage for information. All they could do was to show him his baby’s grave in the churchyard, and tell him that his wife was gone. The vicar was a good man, but hard; he told Israels that he deserved his fate. The wretched creature went back to the deserted cottage on the hillside, and hanged himself in the doorway between the kitchen and the parlour. There, a month later, his corpse was found by Larking, who had come back to get some things for Kitty.

"‘Of course no one would rent the cottage after that. It was lonely before; now were added all the horrors of superstition, and people have been actually known to declare that Israels still haunts the hillside. A shepherd told me seriously about fifteen years ago that his dog saw him, and bolted off some miles across the countryside, half mad with fear. These superstitions come of living too far from a railway: the inhabitants of these combes live, as one might say, some centuries behind the times.’

"‘What could I say after that? I could not own to what I had seen. The squire would have been quite polite about it, but from that moment he would have considered me an unreliable person. One must preserve one’s character for veracity even at the expense of truth,’ concluded the Minor Poet sadly. ‘Therefore I held my tongue; but for all that, I did see what I have told you, and I consider it the most curious experience of my life.’

*(To be continued.)*



## A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

### VIII.

IT was with a feeling of intense pride that the Hosier's Wife next evening took her seat among the others, to hear Stainley Rivers read out the story which Agatha had compiled from her materials. Her eye was fixed upon Sir George Halkett, who, with hands thrust deep in his pockets and an ironical smile upon his face, sat opposite. Something in his expression stimulated the good lady to defiance.

"It'll be your turn in two nights' time, Sir George," said she.

"Do you suppose, my good lady, that I am going to add to this collection of flimsy fictions?" asked the Member of Parliament.

"Well, Sir George, I own," said the lady briskly, "if I 'ad thought a minute, I should *not* 'ave expected you to put yourself out to amuse the company,—not to judge by what I've seen of you so far."

"You're right," replied he coolly. "This company can pay to have itself amused. Now, if you were some of my East End friends——"

"You would feel considerably more at home," remarked the Consulting Physician. "But it will not hurt you to know that there

are other schools of manners in the world; the time might come when the knowledge would be useful."

"Did I understand you to say, sir," piped the Elderly Cousin, "that you would tell us a story if you were paid to do it?"

"None of your impertinence, in the absence of the Master of the House," was the imperturbable response.

"I feel sure, sir, that I shall be doing what our host would approve in offering you your own price for an evening's entertainment," persisted the little man, bristling.

"Sir George has afforded us all so much amusement gratis, since we came," put in Mrs. Locke sweetly, "we ought not to grudge him a fee, I am sure."

"Especially as you know it would go to the men on strike at Bulmer Collieries," said the Socialist. "My price is twenty guineas."

"Dirt cheap," observed the Consulting Physician.

Sir George knitted his brows as though with an idea that some double meaning lay beneath this remark; and the Minor Poet, seeing breakers ahead, arose, manuscript in hand, and at once began.

## The Legend of Deshon.

"IN a thinly populated district of the Western Midlands there stands a big, roomy, comfortable house dating from the time of Elizabeth, and known as the House of Deshon.

"For the last two or more centuries the family of the same name, to whom it belongs, have owned but a moderate estate, and though they live on the land, they are by no means rich. But the country-side is full of traditions of bygone splendour,—of demesnes that extended for miles, a deer forest, a park, a moor, and of another, older, far more magnificent house, long since demolished, which stood in a different part of the estate, on land which no longer belongs to the Deshons.

"Early in the nineteenth century the Squire of Deshon was a conscientious, narrow-minded, hot-tempered, honourable old man, whose life was embittered by the evil courses of his only son Vaughan, a handsome good-for-nothing, supposed strongly to resemble in face a certain Black Deshon, who was the family bugbear. The portrait, by Zuccherò, of this Black Deshon, which was still in the possession of the family, belied his reputation, if looks may be supposed to indicate character. It represented a blonde youth, with a long narrow face, delicate features, and sleepy blue eyes. But this worthy, so said the old story, had called down a curse upon his posterity which had not yet worked itself out.

"This curse was mysteriously connected with New Year's Eve, a date upon which all family troubles fell due, and it is perhaps not to be wondered at that during the last few centuries the Deshons had scraped together a formidable list of misfortunes which had actually overtaken them on or about this festive period. Most families could produce calamities to fit a given date, if their records were sufficiently complete.

"At the time of this story, and for some years past, the New Year had brought to Deshon, with monotonous punctuality, sheaves of Vaughan's unpaid bills. They lay heaped upon the writing-table of his irate and miserable father, on a certain day near the close of the year 1810; and it was this truly

unpropitious moment which was selected by young Richard Conway to make an application for the hand of Vaughan's sister Clare.

"The Conways were the only near neighbours of the House of Deshon. They inhabited a Georgian mansion, the drive gates of which were almost opposite those of the older house. Mr. Conway, senior, had made his money in Army contracts. They were not people of great social standing, and though there was a good deal of intercourse between the families, the Deshons, from their heights of antiquity, looked down upon their simpler neighbours. Richard was the youngest of three sons, and as he had incensed his father by declining to take Orders and accept the small family living which was the only patrimony he could hope for, he was, to put it mildly, a singularly ineligible suitor for Clare, who was a beauty, and for whom a rich marriage was a necessity, since each year of Vaughan's excesses diminished her chances of a marriage portion.

"That Clare should be known to have fallen in love with Richard Conway was a New Year's calamity for which her father had been totally unprepared. The young lover, though he made his application in the stilted form then usual on such occasions, was yet firm in the conviction that Clare returned his affection.

"The old squire lost his temper, did not wait to hear him out,—Richard spoke well and fluently,—but abused him with some violence for several minutes, his poor old hands clenched meanwhile on a bundle of humiliating letters from Vaughan's creditors. It was only when the angry old man paused to take breath that he perceived that the suitor had something more to say.

"‘I wished to add,’ said Richard, still with the imperturbable calm which distinguished him through life, ‘that I shall, in all human probability, inherit a very considerable fortune on the first day of next year. My object in coming here to-day was to ask whether the fact of my possessing such a fortune would make any difference in the feelings you were just now good enough to express.’



"THE SQUIRE SAT STARING DURING THIS REMARKABLE RECITAL."

"Give me none of your impertinence, sir!" cried the squire. "Where is your fortune coming from? Not from your father, if I rightly understood him on the occasion of our last conversation!"

"I only ask to be permitted to inform you, sir. You have, in bygone days, met my uncle, the admiral, who lived with us during the last years of his life. My eldest brother Harold was his godson and his favourite, and to him he willed all his prize-money—a handsome sum and well invested. Harold, as you may remember, was likewise in the Navy. It was agreed between my father and the admiral that the latter should provide for Harold, and that the bulk of my father's fortune, including the house, should go to James, whose tastes were more those of a country gentleman. But about a year before my uncle's death we ceased to hear from Harold. In those days of war and adventure this was not so very

surprising; of his death we thought we should probably have been informed. But my uncle, wishing to guard against the indefinite tying up of so large a sum, inserted a codicil in his will just before death providing that if Harold were more than seven years absent, the money should be unconditionally mine. From that day to this we have heard nothing of my brother, and the fortune is mine on the 1st of January."

"The squire sat staring during this remarkable recital. He remained silent for a moment when Richard ceased speaking; then, in a slow voice, unlike himself, he said:

"On the 1st of January? Mark my words, your brother will come home on New Year's Eve. No luck ever came to a Deshon with the New Year. But you know the legend. If any tangible piece of good-fortune should come to us then, the curse is lifted and harmless for ever more."

"If mine should be the hand to lift it!"

burst out Richard, with a moment's oblivion of reserve. Then he added in his customary tones: 'I have not mentioned my chance of fortune to your daughter.'

"The old squire looked approvingly at him. He was good to look at. If only the lost sailor would continue to absent himself for a few weeks longer, Richard would make a charming son-in-law.

" 'You did right,' he replied more kindly. 'But it is borne in upon me that your brother will return at the eleventh hour. But, be that as it may, remember this: I lay my commands upon you neither to see nor speak to my daughter until after twelve o'clock on the night of the 31st. As you know, we expect a large gathering of friends then, and, should all go well, your betrothal shall be announced when the clock has struck the hour.'

"With this the young man was fain to be content. He bowed himself out of the library, and was proceeding along the dim twilight hall, when there was a swish of soft skirts, and the girl he loved stood before him.

"Clare Deshon was very pretty—pretty enough to stir her staid young lover's pulses; but he was a man of his word. He bowed to her gravely and formally, his hat sweeping the ground, and had passed on before the beautiful girl could realise that he meant to leave her thus.

"But he was shaking from head to foot as he gained the door. The longing to go back, to look once into her eyes, to crave her pardon for his discourtesy, was well-nigh unbearable. He dashed down the avenue as though pursued by the Deshon curse, for which he had a supreme contempt.

"To stay at home so near her during the intervening days of waiting would be, he felt, beyond his powers, patient and self-contained though he was. He bethought him of an offer of a couple of days' hunting from a friend across the shire, and immediately prepared and started off, attended by his man, for the long ride in the winter's evening.

"He had not been gone very long before there was a ring of quick hoofs upon his father's gravel, a horse galloped to the door,

and from the horse's back Vaughan Deshon hurriedly threw himself, pealed at the bell, and asked for Mr. Richard. The butler informed him that Mr. Richard had just started for Sir Joseph Lake's place at Senderton, and was not expected back until the 31st, unless it should freeze, which then seemed improbable. Vaughan made a gesture of impatient despair. Was Mr. James at home, by any chance? James Conway was married and lived in another county. He had not spent Christmas at his father's house owing to the illness of his wife.

"Vaughan turned away disconsolate, leading his tired horse; strolled down the Conway drive and up that of the House of Deshon; took the horse to the stable, and went indoors.

"Nobody but his sister was in the morning-room when he pushed open the door. She was seated alone by the firelight, and the moment she saw Vaughan's face she knew that he was in some fresh trouble.

" 'Where have you been?' she asked.

" 'At Onslow's,' he replied, throwing himself into a chair.

"The girl's heart sank. Mark Onslow was her brother's evil genius—a drunkard, a gambler, a man of low tastes and wild moods. She said nothing, however, for she was not in Vaughan's confidence.

" 'Have you and Dick quarrelled?' he asked suddenly.

"She drew herself up, still quivering from the wound which her lover's behaviour had given her.

" 'I have had no speech with Mr. Conway since yesterday.'

" 'He's gone off to Senderton,' blurted out Vaughan.

" 'Indeed!'

"She would not show herself hurt or surprised.

" 'I did not know that he was so intimate with the Lakes,' went on Vaughan fiercely. 'If he is thinking of Evelina I'll strangle him with my own hands. I may not be fit to have her, but no one else shall.'

"Evelina Lake was Vaughan's one hope of salvation. His love for her was the most real thing about him. Clare had sometimes thought that, could the evil influence of



Onslow and his set be removed, his love was strong enough to reform him. Sir Joseph Lake naturally objected to any engagement while Vaughan continued his present evil courses, but it was probable that he would relent should the young man show signs of real improvement.

"Clare did not of course believe that Richard cared for Evelina, but she thought it possible that her father might have so cruelly answered him to-day as to send him away in a rage; and who knows what an angry and rejected man will do?

"Vaughan, finding her unresponsive, rose and strolled to the door, pausing there to say:

"'Tell my mother that I am starting for Shrewsbury early to-morrow morning, and shall not be back until the following day.'

"'To Shrewsbury!' echoed Clare in surprise.

"'Yes; I have business there.'

"'I suppose you remember that we expect guests on the night of the 31st?'

"He gave a wild kind of laugh.

"'I shall hope to attend, if alive. If not, the Black Deshon may take my place,' quoth he, as he slammed the door behind him.

"Clare sat on in the firelight, the old doggerel of the curse ringing in her head:

The curse shall work each Old Year's night  
Till Wrong be Right,  
Till Black be White.

"There had always been two factions in the family respecting the interpretation of this curious bit of doggerel, some saying that it pointed to some signal piece of good-fortune or change, which should lift the ban for ever; others, that it was but another way of saying that it should never be lifted at all.

"Clare inclined to the latter belief. The clouds were gathering more darkly round the old house. Vaughan was the last of his race in the male line, and he showed no signs of reformation; the fanciful or superstitious might almost look upon him as a re-incarnation of the bad tendencies of the Deshon blood.

"And for herself all things looked black. Whether her father had said Yes or No, she could not account for Richard's attitude,

and during the following days the old squire said nothing to enlighten her.

"There had been an unlooked-for change in the weather. On the evening of the 30th it froze hard, with that sudden nipping frost which does not last. The last day of the year dawned grey and bitterly cold; as the morning wore on, the frost showed signs of giving, the wind rose, and masses of snow-clouds gathered threateningly.

"As Vaughan Deshon strode into the yard of the Blue Boar at Shrewsbury to claim his horse, his heart sank at the thought of the long miles of bad road which lay between himself and home.

"He was weary and miserable—worse than miserable—very near despair. Regret for a wasted life was gnawing at his heart. Now that all his wildness, all his scorn of his ancient name, had culminated in one last mad quarrel, he repented. The shock had steadied him. Believing, as he did, that he was to die that night, he felt the desire to make something of his life well up in his heart; and remorse was crying in his ears, 'Too late! Too late!'

"A stir and clatter were going on in the yard. A cluster of men stood admiring the points of a dashing little brand new phaeton; while the ostler led out from the stable a pair of glossy chestnuts which had evidently been well baited, and proceeded to put them to. The whole turn-out was so much smarter than anything one was wont to see at the Blue Boar that Vaughan also paused to look; and as he stood there, a man, big, ruddy, and prosperous-looking, appeared in the doorway of the inn, wiping his lips as one who has dined well, while the host proceeded to help him into his huge driving-coat, costly and comfortable. He was giving orders loudly and cheerily. Something in his face and voice were familiar to Vaughan, who, distracted for the moment from his own woes, drew nearer to the group.

"'Yes, sir, snow or no snow, I go to Deshon to-night,' the newcomer was loudly saying. 'Ten years since I left it all! A long time. I must expect changes.'

"Recognition darted through Vaughan's

brain. He felt certain that this was Harold Conway, Richard's brother. Vaughan, it is to be remembered, knew nothing whatever of Richard's recent interview with his father, nor of the fortune then trembling in the balance. He started forward.

"I cannot be mistaken : you are Harold Conway !"

"The big man turned upon him, stood a moment, then held out both hands in expansive greeting.

"Vaughan ! By all that's good, this must be Vaughan Deshon ! Why, my lad, you were at Eton when I saw you last !"

"And you were a young naval lieutenant in an elegant uniform, which I doubt you wouldn't get round you now," said Vaughan. "Where have you been ? What have you done ? Your family have given you up for lost."

"Time enough to talk of me !" cried

Harold. "Tell me of the home folks. How is my dear old nunky, the admiral ?"

"Vaughan hesitated ; but Harold would be answered. He was obliged to own that the admiral had been dead seven years.

"The news cut deep, as could be plainly seen. It was some minutes before the returned wanderer could proceed with his inquiries. However, at last he turned again to Vaughan the face he had averted, and smiled ruefully.

"I've come back rich and lucky," said he ; "but Death meets me on the threshold. I hardly dare ask after the others."

"The others are all well," said Vaughan ; "they will be at the House of Deshon to-night—my father has festivities going forward."

"You will have to hasten home, then," said Harold.

"Vaughan assented. At the word, his



"BY ALL THAT'S GOOD, THIS MUST BE VAUGHAN DESHON !"

own troubles loomed large again. A man brought his horse.

"Then Harold turned to him vehemently. He must not ride, but drive with him. He could easily leave his horse in the innkeeper's charge.

"Vaughan looked at the man before him with a sudden gleam of hope. He grasped the strong arm of Harold and led him out of earshot of the stable-men, and in a few words his secret was out. He was not going straight home. He was to fight a duel that night with Mark Onslow. The cause was some quarrel over the cards, duly fomented by the unprincipled young scamps with whom Onslow associated. But of late the hand of Government had been heavy on duelists, and so well known were the two young men that it was a hard matter to arrange a meeting. They had accordingly fixed upon the most unlikely moment—namely, that very night, when the whole neighbourhood would be at Deshon, including, as would be thought, their two selves. The place was the Grey Wolf, a small inn with an evil reputation about half a mile from the house, in a by-road. If all went well for him, Vaughan intended to put in an appearance at the festivities later.

"His worst difficulty had been that he could find no second. He would not ask any of the Onslow crew, Richard had taken himself off, and his two or three acquaintances in Shrewsbury were all engaged in New Year's revels. Harold came to the rescue at once. He had knocked about the world so long that a duel was all in the day's work. He would come and see the thing through. Of course all would go well, and afterwards they would drive on and electrify the Deshon guests by their appearance. He made plans with celerity. His servant he would leave behind at the inn, ostensibly to bring home Vaughan's horse next day, thus securing perfect secrecy. His easy courage and good spirits put fresh heart into Vaughan. In ten minutes all was arranged, the ostler had let go the horses' heads, the carriage had dashed out of the inn yard, and they were rattling out of the town as fast as their fine cattle could carry them.

"Now, if the snow will but keep off, this

is a grand adventure,' cried Conway. 'But if it comes on heavily, I will not vouch for our even reaching the Grey Wolf to-night, for the frost is giving and the roads are getting soft.'

"They had barely left the town lights behind when the first few flakes descended noiselessly. At first they scarcely heeded them; but they grew thicker and thicker by slow degrees, till, as daylight waned, talk between them dropped, and with steady, silent deadliness the white fall covered all things in its magic mantle. Harold, however, professed no anxiety; the frost held better than he had expected, and they made good progress.

"We shall do it—we shall do it!' he cried cheerily. 'They keep the roads better than they did when I left the country. I wonder, Vaughan, is Shire-End Lane in fairly good trim? Because, if so, we might go that way and get to the Grey Wolf by the Roman road, without going through the village.'

"Vaughan agreed. Shire-End Lane had been lately mended, and was good enough; it was certainly best to avoid the village. He gave his answer in such drowsy tones that Harold looked keenly at him. He saw his eyes, heavy with want of sleep, and realised that the sudden lifting of some of his load of anxiety had produced reaction.

"Take a nap, lad,' said he. 'Do you good. I know the way.'

"Second to the left,' said Vaughan sleepily; and then consciousness drifted from his hold, and he slept profoundly; the tension of his overwrought nerves relaxed.

"The sudden stopping of the carriage woke him with a start.

"Eh, what is it? Are we there?' he asked a little incoherently as he rubbed his eyes.

"No,' replied Harold, with an edge of annoyance in his tone. 'This plaguey lane seems likely never to end. The snow is so bewildering I keep thinking I may have passed a turning in the dark. We should have reached the cross-roads by now.'

"If you have passed them you can easily tell,' said Vaughan. 'The wall begins at the cross-roads.'

"There's no wall here—hedges both sides.'

"Then we have not come as far as you

thought. Hedges here! How the snow does change the look of things! This seems too narrow for Shire-End. You did take the second to the left?’

“There was a pause.

“‘Did you say the second? I took the third,’ said Harold hurriedly.

“‘Then we are miles out of our road. This lane runs right away from the Roman road. . . . How far have you come along it?’

“‘A long way, I’m afraid. I passed one turn to the left, but no cross-roads.’

“Vaughan reflected.

“‘The bother of it is, I can’t recollect where this lane leads to; I don’t fancy it leads anywhere. The direction we want must be somewhere over your left shoulder. We had better turn round and take the first road we come to in that direction.’

“Harold assented, and, the turn being

made with difficulty, they went forward once more, each anxious, but hiding his anxiety from the other. Much to their relief, the wind had dropped, and the snow now almost ceased to fall. The horses, with their faces in the new direction, seemed to go at a better pace.

“At last Vaughan said with joy:

“‘I see a light!’

“Harold looked vacantly before him.

“‘Where?’

“‘There, straight ahead.’

“‘I see no light.’

“‘Nonsense! the hedge must be in your way. There is a light in the window of the cottage.’

“‘Cottage? I see no cottage.’

“‘Then you must be blind. Look!’

“Vaughan took his arm in his earnestness, pointing forwards.

“‘Well, that’s odd,’ slowly commented Harold; ‘I saw neither the cottage nor the light as I came by.’

“‘Why, here is your turning. You said you passed a turning.’

“‘Yes, a turning; but there was a hurdle across it.’

“‘A gate, you mean,’ said Vaughan. ‘It looks



“SOON A TURN BROUGHT THEM FULL INTO VIEW OF A LARGE MANSION, LIT UP FROM END TO END.”

like a private road.' And, lifting up his voice, he cried, 'Hi ! gate there—gate !'

"A wavering chink of light quivered along the snow as a door was slowly opened. Through the sifting flakes they saw the white head of an old man, who slowly advanced, opened the gate, and stood aside for them to pass through.

"'Are we right for Deshon?' asked Vaughan, who was nearest to him.

"The night was still, the carriage had stopped, but even in the complete silence there was difficulty in hearing what the tremulous voice said.

"'Straight on, sir, straight on. All the world's there to-night.'

"'Ask him where we strike the Roman road,' said Harold.

"But the old man seemed deaf ; the answer was not intelligible.

"'Don't waste time on him,' hurriedly said Vaughan ; 'we know we are right for home and that's enough.'

"He dived in his pocket, produced a shilling, and dropped it, as he thought, into the shadowy hand stretched out by the old man, who stood just outside the circle of light thrown by the carriage lamps. But at that moment the horses gave a frantic leap forward, and as they galloped off he heard the coin ring against a stone that peeped from the snow beneath. The frightened animals carried them along the dark lane at a pace that took Harold some time to check.

"'Queer beasts,' he remarked. 'What startled 'em then, I wonder?'

"'I don't know,' said Vaughan, in a voice full of vague trouble. 'I feel a sense of discomfort myself. I think the old fellow must have been wrong in the head. We cannot be anywhere near home if we go on in a straight line.'

"'Well, the road must lead somewhere,' replied Conway, with a robust self-confidence which was reassuring. 'We are bound to go on—we have no choice. This road is very bad ; we must go at a foot-pace, or the horses won't hold out. Have patience, Vaughan.'

"It was the other man who fretted and fumed ; but Conway as he drove so prudently could not know that each minute

as it ticked past carried him farther from his chance of a fortune. Suddenly the lane debouched upon a high road ; as they turned into it a carriage flashed silently past—a carriage with flaring lamps and four horses.

"'Hark !' cried Vaughan.

"There came a burst of dance - music on the still air, striking their ears with sudden suggestion of warmth and revel.

"'We are near some big house,' said Vaughan. 'Follow that carriage ; the people at the lodge will direct us.'

"They reached a fine stone gateway, the gates flung wide. Flaring torches blazed up a broad avenue, but there was no lodge. The sound of music was louder and clearer, the wail of strings, the clash of cymbals ; now a burst of laughter, shouts, applause.

"'We must drive up to the door and ask,' said Vaughan. 'I feel a curiosity, I confess. I have not the remotest idea where we are, nor what house this can be. Drive in.'

"The avenue was short. Soon a turn brought them full into view of a large mansion, lit up from end to end. They could see that it was grey and battlemented, and that in the centre a huge doorway gaped, radiant with light within. To the left of this were the long lancet windows of what seemed to be a chapel. That, too, was brilliantly lit up, and the figures of pictured saints and martyrs threw stains of rich colour upon the snow without.

"The door opened upon a spacious hall, with a gallery above crowded with musicians. A fancy ball was evidently in progress, for the dresses of all were of the strangest description—men as well as women flaunting it in all the colours of the rainbow. Some kind of square dance was going on at the moment ; they danced fantastically, wildly, with an abandonment and licence which astounded the onlookers, with strange cries and screams of laughter ; and the music was the maddest thing of all. It rioted in the brain with an irresistible cadence, till both men were sensible of a wild desire to dash in, seize a partner, and gyrate to its bidding ; the very essence of revel was in its piercing strains. They neither spoke nor moved ; Harold dared not relax his hold on the reins, for the horses were trembling and





"HE HELD A CRUCIFIX ALOFT, AND HIS FACE WAS A PERFECT ECSTASY OF INDIGNATION AND SCATHING WRATH."

starting as though in a paroxysm of fear. Vaughan clenched his hands upon the side of the carriage as he sat. His brain was so completely in the grip of the music that he was not reflecting upon the strangeness of the scene before him!

"A harsher note than the cries of the dancers mingled with the din—the loud voices of men in angry altercation. Big folding doors to the left of the hall were flung wide, and the watchers in the dark outside could see the rich interior of the

defiance. His shaking hand was clenched upon a dice-box, and in his long fair face and narrow blue eyes Vaughan Deshon recognised himself.

"For a breathless moment he saw himself stand there, laughing horribly and slightly swaying on his feet, in the midst of the boisterous crew. Then the lights in the chapel were suddenly extinguished—the music abruptly ceased with a fearful discord. On the breathless silence fell the stroke of midnight tolling from the chapel bell, and

chapel, the chancel ablaze with tapers. Round the very altar was a group of flushed revellers, one of whom flung the dice with a reckless, drunken gesture; another had let his head fall forward on his arms, and lay in torpor upon the holy table; some had risen as though suddenly disturbed; one was strolling down the coloured pavement towards the hall, and in a moment had descended the steps from the chapel door and stood among the dancers. His face was drawn as if with some shock of terror, but mingled with haughty



there emerged from the darkness and stood upon the steps the figure of a priest, with white face and black habit. He held a crucifix aloft, and his face was a perfect ecstasy of indignation and scathing wrath. He cried aloud, with denunciatory voice, in the Latin tongue; they caught but a word here and there, but it was evident that he was pronouncing a curse upon the profaners of the sanctuary. Curiously enough, both men said of it afterwards that it sounded not like a voice, but like the echo of one, as though he who spoke were divided from them by some immense distance, not of space, but of *time*. For a moment it seemed as though the passionate words would cow the wild throng, till with a cry a man rushed upon him, another followed; the priest was torn down, dragged under . . . there was a flash of daggers, a howl of hate . . .

"And thereat Harold's horses took the bit between their teeth and bolted. With precipitation they fled the awful scene, and no wrist could have held them in their frantic terror until they had galloped far, far from the ghastly hall and its wild doings, and were floundering about in what seemed to be a grass country, without road or track or hedge to guide their wanderings. But when at last they suffered themselves to be controlled once more, and fell into their usual pace, covered with foam, with heaving sides, still there floated to the ears of the two men across the snowy desolation, the witching cadence of that intolerably enthralling dance-music.

"It was thus that Harold Conway lost a fortune, and thus that his younger brother Richard gained both fortune and bride. The wayfarers arrived at Deshon about one o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, just twelve hours after the betrothal of Clare to Richard had been announced to the assembled guests at Deshon.

"Harold's story was simple enough. He had been made a prisoner of war in a remote French colony. When at last released, he had determined not to return home inglorious and empty-handed. The frigate in which he sailed had been most

fortunate in the matter of prizes, and he had come back a rich man after all.

"A day or two afterwards, in bright sunshine, they rode to the spot where, at the lane corner, the old man had first misdirected them.

"There was no cottage there, nor trace of one; no gate, but a hurdle fastened across a wretched lane, little better than a cart-track. But under the hurdle were the clearly marked tracks of wheels in the smooth snow; on the farther side the snow was tossed about with the pawing and trampling of restless horses; and upon a large stone, Vaughan's shilling lay sparkling in the sun, untouched where it had fallen.

"They followed their wheel-marks along the lane into the high road, and to a gap in the hedge where a rough block of masonry suggested that a gate might once have been. The double line of tracks upon the snow swept along a field of short grass, evidently used as grazing-land for sheep. No house or building of any kind was at the place where they had come to a standstill; here and there a broken ridge suggested the lines of foundations,—that was all.

"But on their at last confiding to the squire the story of their joint hallucination, he had strange things to tell. The old mansion house had actually stood upon the spot where it had appeared to them; and the legend of it was to the effect that the Black Deshon, at the old year's merry-making which was the immemorial custom of the family, had gambled upon the high altar, and that a monk had pronounced upon the house, therefore, a curse which had not yet ceased to work.

"Moreover, the phantom house had been seen before, as he had heard in his youth; but the legends concerning it were vague and he had paid little heed to them."

After a pause the narrator added:

"Mrs. Hogben wishes me to say that it has not been seen since; also, that both Harold Conway and Vaughan Deshon were personally known to her father in later life, and that the family quite believed Vaughan's reformation to have lifted the curse. He married Evelina, and had several sons, who all did well."



A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

## IX.

A GOOD deal of interest had been excited among the Relations as to what young Mrs. Baring's qualifications as a story-teller would prove to be. They had all been so agreeably astonished by the quite unforeseen powers of Mary March that they felt anything might be expected of the pretty young girl who was barely out of her teens and owned that she had never had an adventure in her life. It was obvious that her story could not be of an autobiographical description; but that made it all the more uncertain, and stimulated anticipation in proportion.

On the night when Stainley Rivers, rising, as was his custom, from the fireside circle, gravely proclaimed that Mrs. Baring had undertaken to entertain the company, she grew pink to the roots of her pretty fair hair; but, reassured perhaps by the looks of pleasant friendliness which greeted her on all sides, she said with a clear voice, almost entirely free from embarrassment:

"I am going to tell you a story which does not come to me quite first-hand. It was told me by the sister of one of the most prominent portrait-painters of the day. My

husband thinks I shall not be indiscreet in relating it if I follow his own example, and change the names of all the people in it. It really happened, to the best of my knowledge and belief. I shall call it

### A Chance of Travel.

"It was the constant boast of Leo Dampier that nobody would take him for an artist, judging by his appearance. He never wore aggressive neckties, nor evaded his visits to the hairdresser. His clothes were in no way remarkable; he himself was a tall, keen-faced, clean-shaven fellow, more like the traditional Sherlock Holmes than an apostle of the beautiful.

"But he was a very successful portrait-painter. He excelled in getting hold of a person's dominant note. He so flung the likeness upon his canvas that you could tell in a moment what kind of person his sitter had been. By this I do not mean that he extracted all his victim's worst and meanest passions, and laid them bare to the world's gaze, as does our modern school of painter-vivisectionists; his style of truth was persuasive, not brutal.

"He lived and worked in Hampstead, where the sun sometimes shines and the air has been known to be clear. He was rather congratulating himself upon the fact, one December evening, as he left a friend's dark studio in Edwardes Square and bent his steps towards the railway station in High Street, Kensington.

"He was feeling fagged. Body and brain had been over-taxed during this, the busiest autumn he had known. All his work had been in London; since July he had had no escape from town and toil. That morning he had determined upon a few days' holiday, and had written a note to his unfailing friends, the Bensons, who lived in Polweston, an ideally remote Cornish village. The family consisted of three elderly people, a bachelor brother and two sisters. They were cultivated, delightful folks, much attached to Leo; and to them he fled, without ceremony, when he required a rest.

"His conscience accused him a little of neglecting his friends, for it was nearly two years since his busy, progressive life had given him a chance of claiming their unfailing hospitality. Now he was determined to shelve everything, work and society alike, and make a dash for freedom and friendship.

"He remembered as he walked, that the letter embodying this determination was still in his pocket, unposted in the hurry of the day. He resolved to put it into the pillar-box near the station; but a glance at his watch revealing the fact that he must run to catch his train, this intention remained unfulfilled, and when he left Baker Street, after changing into the Hampstead train, the letter was still his companion.

"He was so tired when he took his seat in an empty compartment that he leaned back with his head against the cushion, and closed his eyes. He dozed peacefully for a minute or two, dreaming of Polweston and the sound of the wind in the beech forest that lay in the combe, with a torrent foaming at its rocky base.

"When he opened his eyes, the train was already in motion, and he saw that during his nap a lady had entered the carriage. She was seated in the opposite corner, and he was looking at him. His attention was

immediately arrested. Her face was not only beautiful, but uncommon—a face that drew him, though he did not wholly like it. Her eyes were long, subtle, heavily fringed, with a laugh in them—the curve of her lips, the line of her cleft chin indescribably bewitching. She wore a picture-hat—all black; and her dress was black too, or seemed so in the indifferent illumination of Metropolitan gas. There was a gleam of diamonds somewhere in the soft mist of black about the throat, and her hands were full of daffodils. As she sat, the whole picture leaped to the man's imagination. If he could paint her—like that—just like that—the vividness of the face, the gleam, the individuality that shone there! He had never felt so possessed by a subject before.

"The idea of Polweston began to fade. No holiday if he could work on a subject like this! The composition, the very lighting he wanted, were all there,—the lamp which made the wonderful, speaking face luminous, caught the pale, intense yellow of the flowers, and left the details in soft, mysterious, warm gloom.

"He studied her furtively. What kind of woman was she? The kind that it might be possible to address, and beg a sitting from? No! He knew it at once. She looked unconventional, but she also looked patrician. He wondered at her. What could she be doing there, in a second-class railway carriage on a December night, without her gloves, and apparently without a cloak? No, she had a cloak: he caught a glimpse of saffles; it had slipped down behind her on the seat.

"He sighed; she was unapproachable; he could do nothing but look, and look he did—from behind the shelter of his unfolded newspaper. She sat as still as though she were being painted. What a model she would make! She did not stir, even when the train stopped at St. John's Wood Road. It moved on again slowly, and by a lamentable mischance Leo's abnormal fatigue overcame him, and in the midst of his staring and studying he fell asleep. He dreamed that the girl who sat opposite entered into conversation with him, asked him if he would paint her portrait, and promised to



"SHE WAS SEATED IN THE OPPOSITE CORNER, AND WAS LOOKING AT HIM."

come to his studio. She explained that she could give him but one short sitting, as she was leaving England immediately, and added that she had heard that he was a very quick worker. He eagerly promised to do his best, said he would prepare a canvas, and gave her his address. In the midst of his excitement and elation, he awoke with the stopping of the train. The guard was calling 'Finchley Road!' . . . and his fellow-passenger was gone.

"He stumbled from the train in bewilderment. How much of it all was a dream? Had he fallen asleep at Baker Street and dreamt the whole thing? Was the lady entirely the creature of his own imagination? He could not believe it; he was certainly awake, wide awake, when the train entered St. John's Wood Road. His whole memory was seething with the strong impression. He did not for a moment believe himself

cushions—to indicate the dress, with the help of some black drapery of his own arranged on the lay figure—to copy the lighting as nearly as he could by switching on only one of his electric lamps.

"He never thought of wondering at his own conduct—of asking himself why he should be working at high pressure on the study of an unknown girl, when he was so tired that all his being cried out for rest: he just went doggedly on, as though he had been offered a large reward for finishing the work in a given time.

"His landlady brought him some food. He ate it mechanically, and worked until midnight, when sleep overcame him. So utterly worn out was he that he did not awaken until ten o'clock the following morning, when he instantly repaired to his studio, where his work of the previous night fairly startled him, so close had he

capable of inventing so original and striking a type of beauty. Hastening to his studio, he seized upon charcoal, and began, in a perfect fever, to draw. He utterly forgot the letter in his pocket—forgot, indeed, that he had ever intended leaving town; he thought of nothing but the image of the girl he had seen. The whole subject was fresh in his mind. He drew the outline with extraordinary success. It was so good that he actually turned to paint, and began to work in a dark grey-green background, near in tone to the dingy railway

come to noting down and fixing his impression.

"‘If this was only a dream, it was a vivid one,’ he reflected.

"He could not understand it. Part of the time he knew that he had been asleep,—they had passed Marlborough Road and Swiss Cottage without his knowledge; but that he had been awake part of the time he felt equally convinced. He prepared his palette, and drew near the fascinating canvas once more. But now he hesitated. What next? Could he carry it further without a model? He began to be afraid that he could not. The detail eluded him. He struggled for an hour with the tantalising thing, and gave it up.

"Was it to remain so? A brilliant beginning unfulfilled? He had never been more in love with a piece of his work. He wheeled it away across the studio in deep chagrin, and began to prepare for his afternoon sitters.

"To his relief, one of these sent word that he could not come. The other, Mrs. Ashton, was a handsome Society woman, clever and charming—a good judge of painting. She at once caught sight of the sketched-in portrait on the easel, and as soon as her sitting was over she began to talk about it.

"‘That’s a fine piece of work, Mr. Dampier! Most promising. I knew a girl so exactly like that! Poor Rosamond! She is dead; her death was a tragedy. She had just that way of sitting and looking up at you with a kind of critical amusement. She was the apple of her father’s eye, and ran away to marry a man they disapproved of. He was in America, and she took her passage in the *Pathfinder*—you remember, the ship that went down last summer; they ran her on the Manacles, off the Lizard, and she sank with all hands. Do tell me what is the name of this girl you are painting?’

"‘I—I really can’t tell you,’ stammered Leo, feeling inexpressibly foolish. ‘I saw her by chance, and thought I could do her from memory; but it’s a failure—or, rather, I mean, I can’t go on; it will never be finished.’

"Mrs. Ashton was much amused, and rallied him a little respecting his fair

unknown. He assured her that his admiration was purely Platonic.

"‘It’s only the picture I’m so keen about,’ he said. ‘There was something in her face I didn’t altogether like.’

"‘Perhaps you may have good luck and see her again,’ said Mrs. Ashton.

"‘She said she was leaving England,’ he began, and then stopped short, remembering that he had merely dreamed that she said so.

"‘Leaving England? Then perhaps it was Rosamond,’ cried Mrs. Ashton. ‘When did you meet her? How long ago?’

"‘Yesterday,’ he stammered, scarlet.

"‘Oh, that makes it out of the question. You know it is four months since the *Pathfinder* was lost. Well, goodbye. You look fearfully fagged, and I am delighted you think of taking a holiday. I shall be thankful to have no more sittings until after the rush of Christmas is over; and my portrait will be all the better if you finish it when you come back fresh.’

"She went away, and Leo, left alone, threw himself down in a wicker chair by his fire, meditating. Presently he rang the bell, and bade his landlady post the letter to Polweston at once, and to pack his portmanteau for a week’s visit.

"‘I am leaving town to-morrow,’ he said.

"‘Very good, sir; shall I light up, sir?’

"‘No, thanks. I am not working. You may draw the curtains.’

"If one does send one’s landlady out on an errand, a visitor is bound to arrive at the critical moment. Mrs. Jones left the studio door ajar in order to be able to admit herself on her return, and consequently no bell rang and no announcement was made when the lady of the railway carriage walked in and stood before Leo in the firelight. He hardly felt surprised. It seemed as if some development were inevitable.

"‘You have come,’ he said, leaping to his feet in an excitement which sent a thrill through every nerve.

"She smiled brightly at him, with a charming bow, as who should say, ‘I keep my word.’ With that she moved away across the room, and stood looking at the

canvas where he had drawn her. Then she spoke, with her back to him.

"‘I can give you two hours,’ he heard her say.

"He moved to the switch, and turned on the one electric lamp which answered to the lighting of the railway carriage. When he came back, she had seated herself in the same inimitable pose in which she had sat yesterday.

"He stared at her in an astonishment so great that it seemed to neutralise itself.

"‘Whether you are a dream or not,’ he cried, ‘by Heaven I am going to paint you!’

"She made no reply, merely looking at him with that touch of veiled amusement which she had worn yesterday. Every now and then she moved very slightly—just enough to let him know that she was a real woman and not a picture. He snatched up his palette, and painted as though his life depended upon the precision of every touch. He worked like one playing a game in which he dare not waste a single move. Stroke by stroke he built up pearly shadow

and creamy light, tremulous mouth and melting eye, splash of fire, warm mass of dark drapery, till the face looked at him with the luminous glimmer of very flesh, and the radiance flickered on the pure yellow of daffodils wet from the woodland.

"It seemed to him that he had but begun when he heard the clock strike seven. His two hours must be gone. Stiffly he laid down the brushes from his cramped hand.

"‘I am a brute!’ he stammered—‘I beg

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"HE PAINTED AS THOUGH HIS LIFE DEPENDED UPON THE PRECISION OF EVERY TOUCH."

your pardon. You must move—must take a rest. I—will get you some tea.’

"The studio was swimming round him; he suddenly recalled the fact that he had eaten neither lunch nor tea; he had overtaxed his strength. He tried with all his might to walk to her, to reach the place where she sat; but as he approached she seemed to recede farther and farther away into the distance, to melt like a vision, to slip away like a mist. He was only just in time, with a frantic apology, to clutch at a



chair, into which he dropped as he fainted away.

"When his eyes unclosed he was seated in his wicker chair by the studio fire. The tea-tray stood beside him on its brass stand. One electric light was burning; he was quite alone. It was twenty minutes past seven.

"This, then, had been a vision only. He had dreamed that the lady fulfilled the appointment which he dreamed that she had made. He stood up unsteadily, then sat down again, felt the stone-cold teapot, poured himself out a cup of milk, ate and drank, and began to feel less dizzy. His second attempt to rise found him able to stand and walk as usual.

"He approached his easel in fevered anxiety.

"Heavens! it was true. Dreaming or awake, he had certainly put in two hours' work of the most convincing description. He stared at the portrait as though someone else had done it—with a lurking idea that never before had he performed such a feat, and that never again would he rise to the same height.

"Then he told himself that his brain was over-wrought. He was deluding himself, doubtless, as to the value of a piece of work done in semi-delirium. The country for him to-morrow!—Polweston, and the healing hand of the warm west wind upon his aching forehead. But he would take this elfin piece of work with him, and ask the Bensons, who were judges, whether it was any good.

"It was a scene of storms and whirling snow that greeted him when at seven o'clock on the evening of the next day he alighted at the little station on a branch line which was the nearest to Polweston. The train in which he travelled had encountered a blizzard about fifty miles west of London, and Leo was chilly and depressed. He was half prepared to find that the Bensons had not sent out their horses in such weather, but he was considerably astonished that they had not telegraphed from the village to order a fly to be ready. He had to shiver for half an hour in a cold waiting-room, and fee the

porter for taking his message for him to the inn.

"The storm increased in severity during the seven-mile drive, and had settled down into a heavy snow-fall when at last Polweston was reached. He had thought several times, as he grew colder and colder, that he would have been more sensible to wait at the rudimentary station inn that night; but reflected that the Bensons could not possibly be expecting him to do so, since they knew there was no accommodation. Thankful indeed was he when the house was reached at last. He thought it a little inhospitable that there should be so long a delay in the opening of a door that usually flew open to him at once. At last the shivering driver's peeling ring met with a response, and a man-servant whom he did not know admitted him into the warmth and comfort of the well-known hall.

"'All well, I hope? Miss Benson got my letter?' he cried with some impatience.

"The man looked concerned.

"'Miss Benson is not here, sir. The house has been let, furnished, for six months, to Colonel Anstie.'

"'Let furnished!' cried Leo, transfixed. 'Well, this is a nice mess!'

"The extent of his imprudence began to dawn upon him. It was impossible for horse and driver to get back to the station that night. He himself was sick with cold and hunger; his head ached; he felt discouraged and quite foolish, as though he could not tell what he ought to do next.

"'Very awkward, sir,' said the man civilly. 'Was you come on a visit to Miss Benson?'

"'Yes, I—I wrote. I often come down without notice. It never occurred to me——'

"'If you would kindly sit down, sir ——' said the man, indicating a chair by the fire, and hastening away.

"Meanwhile the driver, unconscious of the hitch in the proceedings, came slowly into the hall with his fare's portmanteau and the flat packing-case containing the portrait. Just as Leo was summoning up resolution to ask the man what he would take to drive him back, or whether he could recommend other quarters, a door opened, and a pretty,

elegant girl, fair-haired, in a black evening gown, came out into the hall.

"She came up to him with a charming air of solicitude. The situation was soon explained. Yes, a letter for Miss Benson had arrived that morning, and the young lady had duly forwarded it to her at San Remo. She was full of sympathy and regret. One thing of course was clear—Mr. Dampier must be their guest for that night. No denial was to be taken. The horse and fly could quite easily be put up, and he must come in at once.

"‘It is a terrible night,’ she said—‘not fit for anyone to be out. Please come in, and they will get you some supper in a very few minutes.’

"He had really no alternative, so he removed his coat, and followed his charming hostess into the pretty sitting-room, known at Polweston as ‘The Little Drawing-Room,’ in which he had spent many pleasant evenings.

"To his relief nobody else was there. He was not often shy; but his position to-night made him feel a little uncomfortable, and he was in complete ignorance as to how numerous the family of Colonel Anstie might be.

"The young lady turned to him with an apology.

"‘I hope you will kindly excuse my father. He is in very poor health, suffering from a complete nervous breakdown; he has been confined to his room for the last few days, so there is only myself to entertain you.’

"He tried to utter suitable thanks; and explained to her who he was and how he always ran down to the Bensons whenever he was in want of rest. ‘But I have been very remiss lately,’ he said. ‘In London one lives in such a rush. I have not written to them for months; and as they were not in town last spring, I didn’t see them, and I suppose they think I have neglected them, and that is why they did not let me know they were away. Of course I generally go to them in summer-time. Don’t you find it very lonely here?’

"‘Frightfully!’ she told him candidly. ‘It was my father’s desire not to leave Cornwall, and the doctors said he must be humoured.

But I am inclined to think it is a mistake, and that I could do more with him if I could get him right away. I am his only child—living,’ she added with a sigh; and Leo, glancing at her deep mourning, guessed at recent troubles, but was too delicate to make inquiries.

"She was both pretty and charming. He fancied a resemblance, in the contour of her face, especially in the fascinating chin, to his Lady of the Portrait; but he knew that he was possessed with the idea of that one face to the extent of fancying her everywhere, and nothing could be more unlike her than this girl’s expression and the sweet steadfastness of her serene blue eyes.

"Hungry as he was, he could not eat much supper. His head was aching and hot, his feet icy, and there were pains in his limbs. He felt depressed, too, wondering what he should do and where he should go on the following day in the wilds of Cornwall, in such weather. He concluded that the only thing for it was to return to London next day. But Miss Anstie, noting his languor and flushed face, thought otherwise.

"The uninvited guest passed a wild, restless, semi-delirious night, and was far too ill to rise next morning.

"The man-servant who came to call him hastily departed, and fetched a superior-looking, elderly woman, who felt his pulse, took his temperature, and, in a soothing voice, like one talking to a child, bade him lie still and rest. He was vaguely conscious of the lighting of his bedroom fire, the application of hot bottles to his feet, the administration of medicine and of cool drink. He remembered little else that day. Next morning his fever was less, but his weakness great. The doctor came; he was kindly nursed and tended—excellent beef-tea, grapes, and a supply of light literature making their appearance successively as he felt desire for them. The elderly woman brought him the kindest messages from the colonel and Miss Anstie, assuring him of their pleasure in entertaining him; and on the fourth day after his arrival he was able to creep along the passage, leaning on the arm of Wenham, to join the colonel in his sick-room for afternoon tea.

"There was a good deal of merriment at this first meeting of the invalids. Colonel Anstie, a handsome, haggard man, with the remains of the wild fires of youth smouldering in his remarkably piercing eyes, extended cordial hands of welcome from the armchair where he sat, with a rug across his knees; and his guest, supported by the man-servant, was able to return his greeting before sinking apologetically into the opposite armchair.

"Miss Anstie was present, and both she and her father exerted themselves to make their visitor feel thoroughly welcome. In fact he distinctly received the impression that they had been somewhat weary of each other's company, and were grateful to him for appearing, to break the monotony of a severe winter in an inaccessible spot.

"They were the last people you would have expected to find in such a place. Miss Anstie—Claudia, her father called her—was an elegant, well-turned-out girl of the Society order, evidently accustomed to a gay life and plenty of company. One could imagine them wintering in Brighton, where theatres and concerts are obtainable and one is never without acquaintance; but Polweston—Leo could not help wondering what they were doing there.

"After tea, Miss Anstie set the gentlemen to play halma, and as the colonel was a good player, and belonged to that peculiarly British type which cannot take a beating, while Leo neither played well nor minded being beaten, they got on admirably. So exhilarating did the young man find his company that he actually rebelled openly when Wenham came to take him back to bed and solitude.

"Next morning the world was green once more. The soft west wind for which Leo had so longed in London had blown upon snow and frost until they disappeared, and the sun was quite warm.

"The young man felt almost well, and the doctor, who arrived during the morning, sanctioned Claudia's suggestion that she should take her guest a short drive in the closed carriage. He returned to lunch so full of spirits and appetite that his hostess showed dissatisfaction.

" 'You are getting well too fast, much too

fast,' said she, 'and I don't approve. When you are well, you will pack your things and fly this dull spot to join your friends, the Bensons, at San Remo, and your company is doing father all the good in the world!'

" 'You have the most delightful way of putting things, Miss Anstie. An uninvited guest arrives late at night, proceeds to fall ill in the house, upsetting all arrangements and giving untold trouble, and then in your charity and tender desire to spare his feelings you pretend you want him to stay.'

" 'I am serious. I think it would be perfectly horrid of you to come here and fall ill, and go away just as we are beginning to train you to be useful.'

"He laughed outright.

" 'Ill or well, I am absolutely at your disposal,' he said. 'I'm not sure that I don't owe you my life; in any case you have earned the right to do what you please with me.'

" 'If that is so, I forbid you to mention the word departure for a whole week from to-day.'

" 'That's too easy—child's play. Set me something harder, to enable me to testify my gratitude.'

"She only laughed as she ran out of the room; her laugh was a joyous one, and seemed to come easily. Both she and her father struck him as people of naturally the highest spirits plunged suddenly into acute grief, and not quite knowing how to bear it.

" 'Come,' said she, with a graver face, re-entering after a while. 'I have found you something difficult enough—or, rather, my father has. I have tried to dissuade him from troubling you; but, you know, just now he is suffering from a fixed idea, brooding over nothing but his grief, and he is not altogether reasonable on some points. He had a terrible shock some months since, and, when he heard the news, fell to the ground like a stone. The doctors tell me there is slight brain pressure, which will pass. But if you only knew how it has changed him! He was so gay and brilliant, and fond of society——' she broke off.

" 'Miss Anstie, can you doubt that I would do anything in my power?'

" 'Come, then, up to his room,' she said.

"The invalid awaited them eagerly. He had a little portfolio beside him, and held one of those circular magnifying glasses which people sometimes use to examine photographs with.

"‘Sit down, Mr. Dampier,’ he said. ‘I am going to ask you to attempt something which you may very possibly feel to be out of your line. You must be quite candid with me. Of course my daughter and I well know who you are. We have seen your

inadequate photographs and a personal description?’

"‘I can try,’ said Leo, full of sympathy for the trembling in the bereaved man’s voice. ‘But I must warn you that such a picture can be only partially a success, and will probably be quite a failure. A portrait from a living model is a wholly different thing. I am afraid the result will disappoint you. But if you will let me try, I shall be only too proud to offer you my work as



"THE SERVANT CRIED OUT INSTANTLY, 'GOODNESS ! IT'S MISS ROSAMOND !'"

portraits on the walls of exhibitions, and, moreover, being personal friends of the Bensons, we have heard them speak of you, and have studied your portrait of Mr. Benson which hangs in the dining-room of this house. I am fully aware that you have as many commissions as you choose to accept, and that, should you do as I ask, the obligation will be on my side. This preamble makes you look quite grave, so I will come to the point at once. Will you accept from me a commission to try to build up a portrait of a woman who is dead, from no better materials than one or two very

some sort of acknowledgment of my sense of your hospitality to me.'

"The colonel and his daughter both demurred, but on this point Leo naturally stood firm. On no other terms would he make the attempt.

"‘The portrait is to represent my daughter—my elder daughter,’ went on the unhappy father. ‘She was considered beautiful ; and I have lost her in the hey-day of her youth and loveliness. Death also took from me her mother, whom she greatly resembled. Her death was sudden, the result of a—of a—catastrophe ; and I have no record of her.

As I grow an old man, my memory will fade. I have a morbid craving for a likeness of my darling, my lost darling, with life, colour, expression.'

"These are what I shall be unable to give you,' broke in Leo, pierced with sympathy. 'Life and expression must be wanting in a portrait taken from a photograph. May I see the copies you have?'

"The colonel took a cabinet photograph from the case beside him, and handed it over. Leo took it; his eyes fell on it. He grew white as ashes.

"Alas!' he cried aloud, and sank back in his chair, unable at the moment to utter any explanation.

"Miss Anstie hurried to the rescue with champagne, and after a minute or two he sat up, staring with fascinated eyes at the cardboard in his hand.

"This lady is not dead,' he said at last. 'I have seen her—twice—not more than a week ago.'

"Impossible!' cried Claudia, leaping to her feet with a shriek. 'She went down in the *Pathfinder* last August. You have seen someone who is like her.'

"Then the likeness is perfect—absolute. You shall judge. I have her portrait here with me. No attempt that I could make to copy this photo could bear any comparison with the picture I have already painted. Let Wenham fetch the canvas in the flat packing-case in my room.'

"Nobody spoke while Claudia flew to carry out his directions. Wenham brought in the case and a screwdriver, and hurriedly opened the package in their presence. When Leo, in fearful excitement, slowly raised the painting, and turned it towards them, the servant cried out instantly:

"Goodness! it's Miss Rosamond!'

"There she sat, the expression on her face seeming to convey a glad, almost mischievous, appreciation of the situation. The minutes ticked by; nobody had spoken except for the colonel's scarcely audible cry:

"My child! My child!'

"At last Claudia forced her dry lips to articulate.

"Of course it is my sister,' she said huskily. 'The dress, the ornaments are

hers. "Daffodil" was my father's pet name for her. You can go, Wenham. Now, Mr. Dampier, sit down and explain this mystery.'

"But that was just what the painter could not do. He could only describe the incident from the beginning, just as it has been told here—to explain it was beyond him totally.

"That Rosamond Anstie had been dead some months when she appeared to him there seems to be no reason whatever to doubt. At least it was ascertained that, living or dead, she had had no communication of any kind with the lover to join whom she had stolen secretly from her father's house. He had been left uncomfited. But to soothe her father's grief she had revisited earth on two occasions.

"Anyhow, there was the portrait; and some declare that, to this day, it remains Dampier's masterpiece. A curious feature in the tale is, that the dead girl had been, when living, a particular admirer of his work, and had more than once remarked that if she were a duchess Dampier should paint her picture.

"The young man never again saw his lovely fellow-traveller. But her interference with his concerns led to far-reaching results, for naturally the unprecedented circumstances drew him into closest intimacy with the Ansties, and six months later he married Claudia.

"The colonel grew better from the day of his beholding the portrait; he would sit and study it by the hour together, and was often heard to murmur to himself:

"It was of me she thought in the land of the Hereafter—me, her old father, not that unmitigated scoundrel."

To the whole of this story the Member of Parliament had listened with a pleased face. When it was done, he turned, smiling, to Mrs. Baring.

"I am delighted with your contribution to our entertainment," said he cordially.

"Indeed, Sir George, why?" cried the lady's husband in a complimented voice.

"Because," solemnly replied the Radical, "as there is not a word of sense in it from beginning to end, it forms such an admirable foil to my own, which is to be heard to-morrow."





A SERIES OF WEIRD STORIES BY G. M. ROBINS.

X.

SOME solemnity attended the gathering of the Relations on New Year's Eve—their final gathering before the arrival of Cousin Noah. They had grown to feel that they knew each other well, and the feelings with which they anticipated the coming of an eleventh relation—a stranger—were something like those of a party of people who have made a long journey together in the same railway carriage, when someone else pops in upon them.

The carriage which was to meet the master of the house had already been heard to sweep out of the stable-yard and begin its long journey to the station; a telegram in the early part of the day had assured them that Mr. Titherleigh Hobson would really and without fail make his appearance at the time specified.

The intervening hours were to be filled up by the Member of Parliament's story, and it was with a somewhat divided attention that they prepared to listen.

"Well, Sir George," piped up the Elderly Cousin, "is your twenty-guinea contribution ready for us?"

His tone was gay; his spirits had been manifestly rising all the day at thoughts of how soon he would be able to cast away the burden of his responsibility.

"It is perfectly ready, sir," replied the Member of Parliament, "and at the service of the company as soon as you hand in the cheque."

"I cannot give you a cheque until Cousin Noah arrives," said the little man, "so you must wait till midnight if you want one; but I can give you banknotes if you don't object."

"A bird in the hand is an old proverb," quoth Sir George. "Hand them over. Cousin Noah is certain to cut up rusty when he hears how I've been behaving, so I'll take what I can get."

The Elderly Cousin handed over four five-pound notes.

"Guineas," said the Socialist firmly.

A sovereign was added; and when he had placed the whole in his pocket, he at once began to speak, with a clearer voice and better enunciation than he had so far favoured them with.



## The Statue of the Marchesa.

"I DON'T expect that any of you know anything about the old cities of the Maremma. The scene of almost everybody's story has been laid in the West of England, with most damnable iteration. However, people do their best, I suppose. I mean to take you farther afield, to a remote place of which I shouldn't mind betting that none of you has so much as heard—Toresi, in the Val di Luna. English people don't go to Toresi: it is inaccessible. But there is a cathedral there worth twenty of that flaunting thing at Milan which everyone flocks to see.

"I was wandering through the cathedral one day with an Italian countess who is my friend—a cultivated woman who has spent most of her life in that part of the world. I stopped short before the statue of a lady which stood upon an altar-shaped tomb in the farthest corner of the south transept, hidden by the lace-like stone-work of a chantry chapel until you were close upon it.

"The thing was life-like. The lady was young and beautiful. She wore much the same kind of dress as that in which Vandycck used to paint the wife of Charles I.—those large full sleeves clasping the arm close at the rounded part just below the elbow and ruffled back with lace. The arms hung down, the hands lightly joined. The head was a little bent forward, so that the curls shaded the cheeks. As you stood before the tomb, she seemed to be earnestly regarding you.

"In front, three steps led down below the level of the church floor, to a small low door, giving access to the vault within.

"That statue is quite modern," I remarked.

"Oh no," replied my guide, "indeed it is not. It is a genuine Bernini."

"My dear lady," I argued, "no Italian donna of the seventeenth century would have perched up coquettishly on her tomb like that. She would have appeared as Saint Cecilia, with a pocket-handkerchief on her head, and a finger lifted to the sky, while fat cherubs bewailed her premature departure from the warm precincts of the cheerful day. That portrait is so life-like, one half expects to see her come down. She is beautiful, and the

thought that such a woman was cut off in her prime makes one inclined to curse Maremma and seventeenth-century sanitary appliances."

"The reason why the statue is so life-like," said my friend, "lies doubtless in the fact that it never was designed for a monument. It was carved during the lady's lifetime, and was intended for the market-square. I wonder if you would like to hear her story. It is considered interesting."

"She is interesting," I replied with alacrity. "Let us sit down here and watch her, while you, like the kind soul you are, make her virtues blossom from the dust."

"We will begin with her name," said the countess. "She was Muriella Bianca Josefa Maria Delagoni, in her own right Marchesa di Val di Luna. She was orphaned of both parents at the age of eighteen, and besieged, as you may guess, by suitors. Petty princes rode over the Alpine passes to woo her, and the Italian nobility swarmed about her like flies in summer in the Rhone Valley."

"But this orphan girl had a head upon her pretty shoulders. She knew her own value, and was not going to throw herself away if wits could prevent such a catastrophe. Not only was she mistress of all the land from this to Ponte Agnesi, and of a palace full of art treasures, but she was also the possessor of a wonderful ruby necklace, gift of Lorenzo the Magnificent to an ancestress, which necklace was the admiration and envy of all, and was considered well-nigh priceless. She was determined to employ all her faculties to avoid marriage with a fortune-hunter.

"Time went by, and at the age of twenty-two she was still undecided. Only two of her lovers had made any real impression upon her heart.

"One of these was Eugenio, Prince of Finalfi; the other, Ranulf d'Alpavaggio, a wild kind of chieftain, half baron, half brigand, who bore not the best of characters, and was certainly in dire need of money.

"Eugenio was well spoken of, and a handsome fellow into the bargain, with fair hair and regular features. Ranulf was ill-mannered and fierce, chafing often at the restraint he

must put upon himself as he dangled about the court of his lady-love. But, with the perversity of women, Muriella saw something to like in him. Probably he possessed for the lonely girl—she was but that, for all her prudence—the kind of fascination which Bothwell had for Mary of Scotland—the fascination of the “great dark brute.”

“Things were in this train when the Marchesa fell ill. Bernini had been modelling her life-sized statue, to be placed in the centre of the town square. The sittings, or rather standings, began to exhaust her. As the work approached completion, she seemed to flag and fail. The great heirloom necklace appeared to weigh her down; she would beg leave to take it off. One day she fell down in a swoon at the sculptor’s feet. That afternoon all visitors were denied admittance. The fever gained in strength; in a few days all was over. The lovely Marchesa was dead, and the statue prepared for the town square was placed upon her tomb here in the Duomo.

“Many suitors attended her funeral—among them, of course, Eugenio and Ranulf.

“As Ranulf, dark and sullen, was turning away at the end of the ceremony, a priest touched his arm. He turned and recognised Father Marco, Muriella’s confessor.

““I was to give you this,” was all that the priest said; and leaving a little note in his hand, was gone instantly.

“Ranulf glanced around. The air was heavy and dim with incense and with the scent of white violets, which Eugenio had heaped about the tomb. The solitary man, ungreeted by the throng of mourners, passed out of the cathedral into the sharp air of a January day, bitterly cold even in Maremma.

“Followed by his few men-at-arms, he went to the poor inn in the village, and ordered such food as the place afforded. Not until he was quite alone did he draw forth from his glove and curiously regard the note so warily handed to him by the ecclesiastic; and as he recognised the dainty hand, a dark flush stole up over his brown face, and his mouth quivered.

“Thus ran the letter:

““This farewell from Muriella will not reach you until she is no more. She sends

you these few secret lines in her own hand, that you may know she had a true regard for you. Once you admired the great necklace of rubies which she was wont to wear. For your sake that necklace shall never leave her neck,—it is buried in her coffin; and the ring you gave her is on her finger until the Judgment Day.”

“One spasm flickered across the sullen face of Ranulf as he read. No tear fell. He did not kiss the paper—he gave no sign of what he felt. His sombre eyes looked forth, unseeing, from their deep setting, at the waning and lowering day without. Was he thinking of all that wealth buried with a dead woman, who needed it not, while he starved in his half-ruined castle on the pine-clad heights?

“Nothing in his expression would have told you anything. He sat on immovable while the minutes went by. After long meditation he rose, struck the bell at his side, and called for a light. When it was brought, he took the taper from the gaping page, and with no visible hesitation held Muriella’s farewell in its light, until it was but a few flakes of black ash. Left once more to himself, he took out a lean purse from his doublet, counted his scanty gold pieces, replaced them, called for his reckoning, and dismissed his men, bidding them ride back to Alpavaggio, as he purposed to lodge in the town that night.

“As the early dusk fell, his tall figure loomed in the doorway of a tiny shop close to the Duomo; it was a locksmith’s.

“The moon was full that night. It streamed into the still, cold solitude of the Duomo, and rested on those curls, on those rounded arms as it will do to-night. There was no sound but the long, sighing tick of the great clock in the western tower.

“Marchesa Muriella slept safely with her ancestors, and her life-like image stood above her tomb.

“The hours crept on to midnight; by that time the moonlight shone no longer on the statue itself, but lay in a little pool of silver, barred with dark mullions, on the ground at its feet.

“Now a sound, ever so slight, broke

the hush—the gentle, distant closing of a door; the cautious falling back into place of hinge and bolt. Presently a figure wrapped in a long cloak came with slow, careful tread from the small door in the north transept, usually the priests' private entrance, and leading into the cloisters. But he who crossed the nave and came warily on, now in light, now in gloom, was no priest: it was Ranulf d'Alpavaggio.

"He drew nearer. When he stood about ten feet from the tomb he halted as though some magic circle protected the snowy marble, drew from beneath his cloak a lantern and set it on a carved projection of stone, so that its light fell flickering upon the sweet face of the statue,

till the delicate features seemed well-nigh trembling into life.

"Long he stood motionless, gazing at the wreck of his hopes; then he sank upon his knees. His head was bare, his dark hair tossed back from the face which, now that he felt sure that none observed him, was free to show its anguish unrestrained.

"Love," he said aloud,—“so far above me always, and now lifted to heaven by the consecration of death,—here, when thou canst not hear, when no human ear listens, I may pour out to thee some part of what I feel! . . . I can look unchidden upon the lovely face I have never kissed, the slender form I never have embraced, and tell my lady what her love has done for me. She

has made me, who robbed, honest—me, who was fleshly, pure; and now she has lifted me up with her to the heights where she reigns: for where my treasure is my heart is too. O love of my life, the words, the blessed words thou sentest me are destroyed! Fain would I have kept them lying against my cold heart to keep it warm; but should I fall, as in my wild life is always possible, some other eye might light upon my jewel, and my lady's tomb be profaned by treasure-seekers. And so I put this vow upon me for evermore—to pass every night here, in the cathedral, with my lady-love, to guard her pure sleep, and to be at hand should any seek to disturb it.”

“More he said—much more; the man's whole heart poured forth at the feet of the woman whose words of love and trust had redeemed him, and tears, the heart-breaking tears of a strong man, mingled with his broken words. But at last he calmed himself, for the hour was very late; and when he had



"LONG HE STOOD MOTIONLESS, GAZING AT THE WRECK OF HIS HOPES; THEN HE SANK UPON HIS KNEES."

prayed, he wrapped him in his cloak, and slept, his head pillowed on his arm, right across the entrance to the vault, and his drawn sword was in his hand—for though he believed that to him only was the secret of the jewels entrusted, and though he had destroyed the letter, yet servants prate, and doubtless there was one or more who knew of the lady's whim, though they knew not of that reason for it which thrilled through his veins like wine.

"So all night he slept there in the cold church, and for many nights after. Sometimes he would come in weary and travel-stained, stay only for his prayers before the little altar of Saint Teresa which stood nearest to his shrine, then fling himself down in profound sleep. But sometimes he would talk to the marble image, and tell her how he longed to press his lips to the sweet likeness of hers: he was too honourable a gentleman to kiss one who could not resist—he would not take from the stone what he had asked of the living woman in vain.

"But a series of nights passed in this manner would seem to have told upon his health. He, strong man as he was, began to be the victim of strange fancies during his lonely vigils.

"One night he had a terrible dream; he thought he woke suddenly and found the statue gone from its place. Springing up, stung by the thought of having slept too soundly, it occurred to him that he might in his weariness have left the small door unfastened. Sword in hand, he darted across to it, but, finding it fast, immediately returned, carefully peering behind every pillar, to find that his lady was standing in her place, calm and beautiful as ever. He was puzzled, but concluded that he must have been asleep. Another time he had a curious idea of having seen the figure move; or rather, not of seeing it move, but of thinking that it had changed its attitude. It was very late that night—later than usual by an hour—when he arrived, for a monk was prowling in the cloisters, and his custom was never to enter until sure that he was unobserved. The moon was extremely bright that night, and, as he entered, and strained his eager eyes across the intervening

space, he could plainly see the lovely face. The chantry chapel which now hides it was not built for many years' after. He turned to make fast the door behind him; then advanced, to find all just as usual, though it was strange how strong his impression had been that when first he entered, the head was raised, and looking eagerly towards the door—towards him.

"Yet a third curious experience was his. He was lying, as he always did, across the doorway of the vault, and was blessed with an exquisite dream that his lady descended from her tomb, after the fashion of certain miraculous madonnas, and kissed him on the brow. In his sleep he stretched his arms out, cried, and so awoke; and, staring up into the darkness above him, thought he heard the faintest sound, and saw, above the edge of the tomb, the swish of soft white robes. He listened, stared—all was still. Then, to satisfy himself, he did what he had never done before—reached up a hand and laid it upon the carved stone skirts of the statue. The icy thrill, the motionless rigidity rebuked his delusion as dream or fantasy of a sick brain.

"So all went on for some weeks, until a night when there was no moon—no stars even, for the sky was covered with dense clouds.

"Ranulf, with his dark lantern, had arrived, had greeted his lady, and was absorbed in his devotions, when a very slight clang, or reverberation, resounded through the church.

"He was on his feet in an instant, had obscured his light, and moved to his post. Another sound, very soft, yet distinct. Then an interval, breathless, interminable. The darkness around Ranulf seemed to him to be full of breathing, as though not himself alone was waiting in strange suspense.

"Then the faint, hesitating flicker of an advancing light—a light that swept slowly to and fro as the man who held it crept on, wary, observant, tense. Inky, mystic shadows fell thickly in the wake of the wavering radiance.

"In a moment Ranulf's determination was taken. There was room to stand upon the tomb, behind the statue,—room for a man





to hide, unseen, unsuspected, in the deep obscurity. His rapier in hand, he lightly leaped upon the slab, and, with a whispered, "Pardon, sweet, pardon!" must touch the hallowed draperies. His outstretched hand came in contact with whiteness, dimly seen. Holy saints! the seal was set upon his hallucinations! He reeled, his brain seemed dancing with the approaching light; he caught his breath in something like a choked sob; he trembled in every nerve; and then, as the light-bearer turned the corner and peered, with lifted lantern, into every recess of the transept, he heard the stillest whisper that had ever reached his ear—so soft, yet he caught each word:

"Sh—h—h, for the love of God!"

"The man who approached heard nothing. The silence was entire and almost palpable. There stood the statue, gazing deeply downward, lace-like shadows from the tomb's canopy playing over it, darkest obscurity behind it.

"The new-comer wore a domino mask over the upper part of his face, and was muffled in a large cloak. But the fair moustache and long locks of Eugenio, Prince of Finalfi, were plainly discernible, as, having apparently assured himself that he was unobserved, he set his lantern on the pavement, slipped off the encumbering folds of his cloak, and produced a bag of tools.

"Only one glance—a glance of shame and terror—did he fling at the lovely face watching his movements so seriously. With the desperation of one who fears each moment to be discovered, he addressed himself to the work of sawing out the lock of the vault door with a keyhole saw.

"At the first sound of the tool grating on the wood, Ranulf started and gripped his rapier hilt; but the least touch in the world restrained him. Could it be that he was admonished by a little foot thrust gently backwards against his own?

"How was it that Eugenio did not hear the sledge-hammer strokes of his heart, and take warning? . . . What mystery was this in the heart of which he suddenly stood? Was it a dream, or a frenzy, or—God of mercy!—was he really standing behind a living, breathing woman, the outline of whose girlish

form vibrated, ever so slightly, as if responsive to the tempest raging in himself?

"Would the grit, grit of that saw never cease? How long had he been standing there, cramped and stiff, curving himself into the least possible space behind?

"At last—at last the crack and splintering of yielding wood. A wrench—something falls on the stone—a hinge grates; the desecrator is within the vault.

"A murmur escapes the raging lover—a murmur of piteous entreaty.

"Madam, I pray you, for love of all the saints——"

"And then a hand, warm and tender, a living, loving thing, drops over the fist clenched upon the rapier hilt.

"Hist! The vault is empty. Leave this man to me——"

"Ranulf moved a little to one side. At all hazards he must see Eugenio come out. He heard the ripping, rending sounds of lead being forced and torn from its fastenings; then at last a moment's echoing stillness; on that a low, weird cry of terror—the voice of one who encounters a sudden shock.

"Eugenio staggered from the vault.

"His face was drawn with horror, his brow clammy, his joints like water. The coffin was full of large stones; and on these lay a long strip of white paper, on which, in scarlet letters, was inscribed one word—

TRADITORE.

"As the traitor appeared, half crawling up the steps, the statue of the Marchesa bent swiftly down; a white hand fell heavily with a touch like marble on his shoulder; a ringing voice startled the deep night silences.

"What do you here, signor?"

"The wretched man let loose a yell which resounded to the farthest limits of the place, turned, saw himself in the grasp of the marble woman, and frantically leaped forward, staggered a step or two, then rolled over on the pavement and lay as one dead, overcome by his own terrors.

"At the same moment Ranulf felt the wall behind him gently giving way; he had by this time pretty well guessed at the existence of a door, and he moved forward to the side of Muriella.



"HE HEARD THE STILLEST WHISPER THAT HAD EVER REACHED HIS EAR: "SH—H—H, FOR THE LOVE OF GOD!"

"A steady beam of bright light illumined the dusky aisles, and in a narrow aperture Father Marco appeared, bearing a lamp in his hand.

"Is it——" he asked tentatively.

"It is," replied the Marchesa briefly.

"Ranulf descended from the pedestal, offered his hand to the Marchesa, and helped her down. He was pale as death, and said no word. Muriella stood, white-robed, between him and the unconscious Eugenio. She spoke in clear, deep tones.

"The test is over," she said. "My father, who was right—thou or I?"

"Thou wert right, daughter," said the old man. "My son,"—he turned to Ranulf,—"I did thee injustice, and I ask thy pardon."

"Ranulf went close to Muriella, his black eyes aglow.

"Didst thou need a test?"

"I needed none." She spoke up regally. "It was to satisfy the father. I sent Eugenio a letter in the same terms as that I sent to thee. None but God will ever know what I suffered on that first night when I saw that it was thou who stole in upon me in the moonlight; and if I live a thousand years, I can never forget the rapture——"

Her breast heaved; she struggled for a voice and found none.

"There was a deep pause.

"The rapture," said Ranulf, with a kind of stiffness, "of hearing what I said? Was it you to whom I spoke, and not the statue?"

"It was I, every night. For the sake of those few minutes I had courage to live through my dull days of concealment in the nunnery beyond there. I felt sure Eugenio would come."

"And is the reverend father now certain that I am no thief?"

said Ranulf, still in the same strained, even voice.

"My son, I have asked thy pardon," replied the old man, surprised.

"Ranulf bowed low.

"I suggest, then, that you and the Marchesa quit the church, and leave me to deal with—this." He lightly touched with his foot Eugenio, who was beginning to stir.

"No," softly replied the Marchesa, "not so. Prince Eugenio is to go free. It was a test, and the result is as I foresaw. But he shall not be publicly shamed; he is to go in peace."

"Lady," went on Ranulf, with unbending politeness, "I crave a word. In what relation, I ask to be informed, do I stand with regard to you?"



"The question brought the pretty despot up short. She gazed at him, first in surprise, then with a deepening colour rising beneath the white powder that veiled her lovely tints. She faltered, caught her breath, almost trembled before that steady, critical look.

"In what position dost thou wish to stand, my lord?" she returned, and felt herself at a disadvantage, standing there before him in the mummery she had used to deceive him withal.

"Often, girl-like, had she dreamed of this scene, but never like this. She had always held out a regal hand to a transported devotee who could hardly believe in his own blessedness. Certainly d'Alpavaggio was nothing if not unexpected.

"Judging from what I have heard thee say," she almost whispered, "I have thought that I was dear to thee."

"Will you be my wife?" said he, as calmly as though he said, "Will you be seated?"

"I will do anything at thy bidding," cried the girl with passion. "Ranulf, canst thou doubt it? I love thee!"

"Then, if that be so, obey me," he said very hastily, for Eugenio was getting to his hands and knees. "Go back into your hiding-place with the father, and leave me, your affianced husband, to dismiss this thief. I will respect your desires—I will not kill him."

"The proud Marchesa turned, and did his bidding without a word. No one knows what passed between Ranulf and Eugenio, but it was nearly an hour before Ranulf tapped at the secret panel, and Muriella had had time to brush the powder from her hair and change her dress.

"D'Alpavaggio stood where the Marchesa had done, and the stone revolved silently on a pivot, leaving the real statue outside in the church, and shutting him into the small passage behind.

"This piece of mechanism had been the monk's contrivance, and had taken weeks to complete. The passage communicated with the adjoining nunnery, and by means of a pivot the woman could be substituted for the statue and the statue for the woman instantaneously and without noise.

"The idea had occurred to Muriella while Bernini was modelling her; and after much thought and planning, she had most satisfactorily carried it out.

"Yet things do not always fall out so near to our wishes as this daring scheme of hers.

"It was strange that when at last she stood face to face with her dark, gaunt, half-starved lover, her first words should be:

"My Ranulf, forgive me—oh, forgive me for what thou hast undergone!"

"And then indeed, at the sight of such unconditional surrender, he took her in his arms, and held her close to the faithful heart which, say the chroniclers, never strayed from her during thirty subsequent years of wedlock.

"His wife survived him; and upon his death she built to his memory the beautiful chantry chapel which stands over the very place where he used to pray nightly, watched by the loving, longing eyes of the woman whom he believed dead.

"Both sleep together in that vault."

Many were the looks which had been interchanged by the Relations during the recital of this story. It certainly exhibited the Member of Parliament in a new light. Though it began with his customary rudeness, that seemed to wear off as he warmed to his work; and when he ceased there was a universal feeling that his contribution to the general entertainment was among the best they had listened to.

There was quite a chorus of thanks when he had done.

"A clever story—a most unusual story!" said the Consulting Physician, twirling his gold-rimmed glasses and nodding approval.

The Elderly Cousin was furtively wiping his eyes.

Sir George bowed his thanks somewhat ironically in return for the various expressions of admiration. He retained his place before the fire, his big legs planted uncompromisingly upon the fur rug. Then he abruptly addressed the Elderly Cousin:

"My story seems to have affected you, sir."

A course of bullying from the Member of

Parliament seemed to have developed even in this meek little man the rudiments of repartee.

"I am easily affected," he replied, as he deprecatingly blew his nose.

Sir George laughed.

"It is a quarter past eleven," he said,

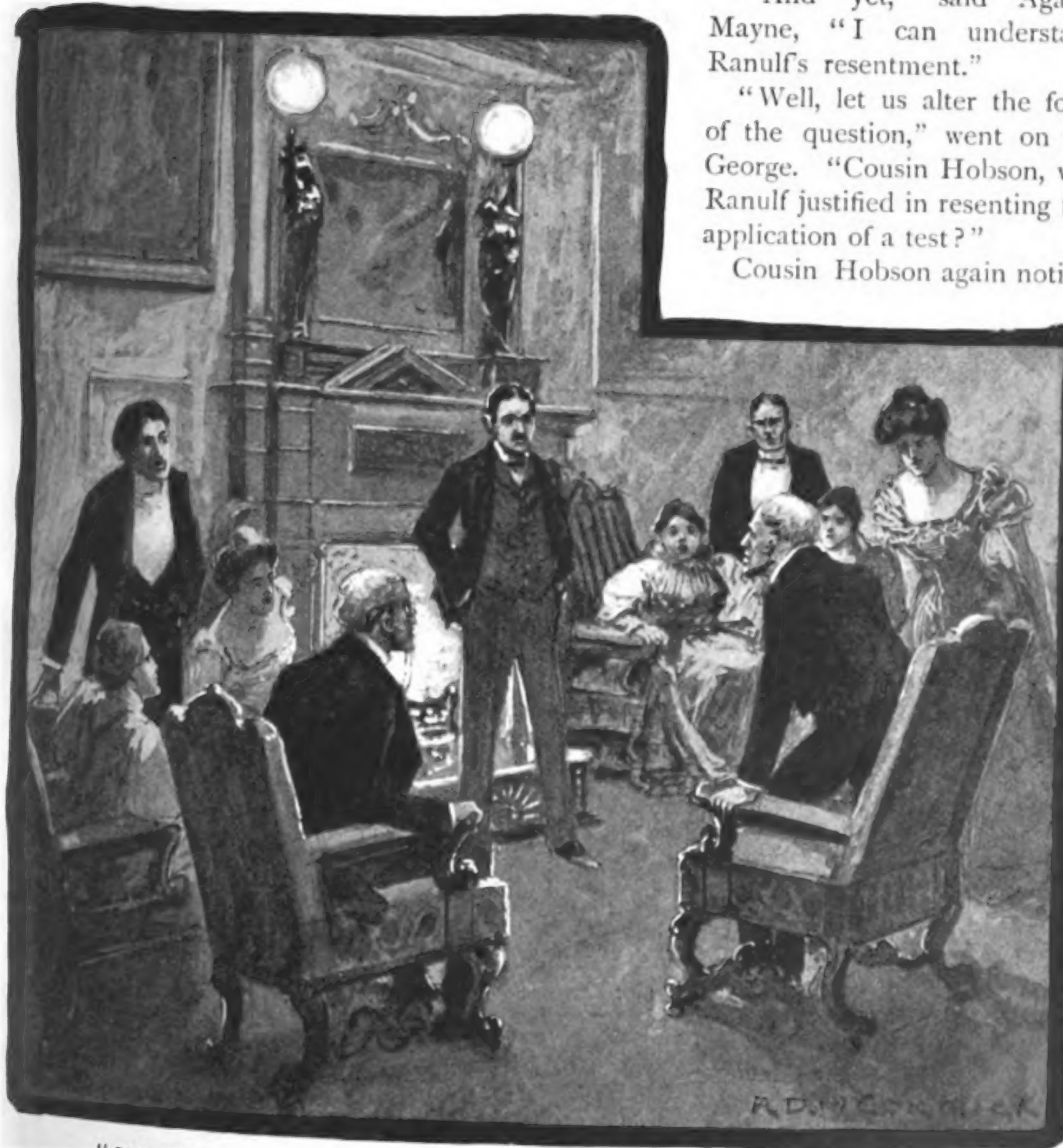
"Why not?" he said at last.

"Unquestionably she was justified," said the Consulting Physician, "as completely as the chemist is justified in applying acid to a gem to test its genuineness; the real gem will take no harm in the process."

"And yet," said Agatha Mayne, "I can understand Ranulf's resentment."

"Well, let us alter the form of the question," went on Sir George. "Cousin Hobson, was Ranulf justified in resenting the application of a test?"

Cousin Hobson again notice-



"COUSIN NOAH, WHAT REASON HAD YOU TO SUSPECT YOUR NINE RELATIONS?"

"and the carriage should return from Holy-leugh about half-past. In the few minutes that remain I want to put a question to you all, but to Cousin Hobson in particular. Do you, sir, I would ask, consider that the Marchesa was morally justified in inventing a trick to test the sincerity of her lovers?"

The Elderly Cousin stared. He was silent and grew uncomfortably red.

ably hesitated before replying with his customary diffidence.

"I think not."

"Why not?" The next question was sharp.

"Because appearances were much against him," struck in the Minor Poet. "He was very poor and his record was not good. It was most natural that his professions of

love for a rich woman should be thought suspicious."

"Ah, now we come to the point," said Sir George triumphantly. "It was fair to test Ranulf because there was reason to suspect him. But, Cousin Noah, what reason had you to suspect your nine relations, that you have applied to them the severe test of a nine days' secret surveillance?"

"Cousin Noah!"

The sensation was great. The Hosier's Wife bounded in her seat, the Minor Poet sprang to his feet, the other ladies looked at each other petrified.

The Elderly Cousin rose from his chair in a state of most evident nervousness, but faced Sir George with a pathetic kind of dignity.

"Of course," said the Member, "you must have guessed all this time that I knew you?"

He met the eye of the Elderly Cousin with the frankest of smiles.

"Do I understand you to suggest, sir, that this is Mr. Noah Titherleigh Hobson himself?" asked Dr. Hardy, advancing.

"Of course; but am I really the only one who guessed?" cried Sir George, looking from one to the other of the Relations as if quite incredulous of so much simplicity. Meeting the genuine, blank surprise in the faces of all, he burst into the first peal of hearty laughter they had heard from him. "He will not deny it, will you, Cousin Noah?"

The little man had had a moment to collect himself; he had drawn himself up, and his nervousness seemed to have disappeared.

"No," he said, "I shall not deny it. I am Noah Titherleigh Hobson, and Sir George has anticipated my avowal by half an hour only. It was my intention, in a few minutes' time, to leave the room on the pretext of giving an order to one of the servants,—to meet the carriage at the lodge, and actually to drive in it up to the door, where you would all have received me. My little design is foiled; it had, perhaps, not very much to recommend it. If you will allow me, before we go further, I will ring the bell, and order James to tell Woodsome to take the horses back to the stables."

Silence reigned while he rang, and the order was given.

Then he turned to them all with a genial smile, and, advancing towards Mrs. Hogben first, cordially shook hands.

"Now," he said, "let me greet you in my own person—not merely as my relation, but as my well-known and valued friend."

"Cousin Noah," said Sir George, "if I have really wounded you I'm sorry. But the temptation was great, knowing that everything I said or did was scoring against me. Besides, the vegetarian dodge made me ill-tempered. If you'll so far pardon me as to allow me to be present at the supper with which we are shortly to celebrate the coming of Cousin Noah and the New Year, I will promise to punish the turkey and the champagne."

Cousin Noah took his outstretched hand.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, "Sir George Halkett has reminded me that I owe some kind of explanation to you all for the part I have just been playing. That I should have suspected you all of unworthy motives is of course inconceivable; but I hope you will all agree with me, that I had some reason for applying a test to your affection for myself. I am an ugly, insignificant old man, ill-educated, unused to society, without personal charm. There is one thing about me, and only one, which could conceivably attract. I am very rich. Will you blame me if I longed to try to attach you to me, in ignorance of the fact that I possessed so strong a passport to your self-interest? I first thought of paying a visit to each of you in turn; but in real life it would be almost impossible for a total stranger to obtain access to eight or nine different houses, and to remain long enough to become intimate with his entertainers. So I hit upon this little expedient. During your visit I have been at pains to become acquainted with each of you. The result is that I am sincerely attached to you all, and hope to be able to help each one in the way most needed and most acceptable.

Here he affectionately took the hands of Stanley and Agatha, and joined them.

"Let our little masquerade end," he said, "as did the Marchesa's, in love and in reunion."

THE END.